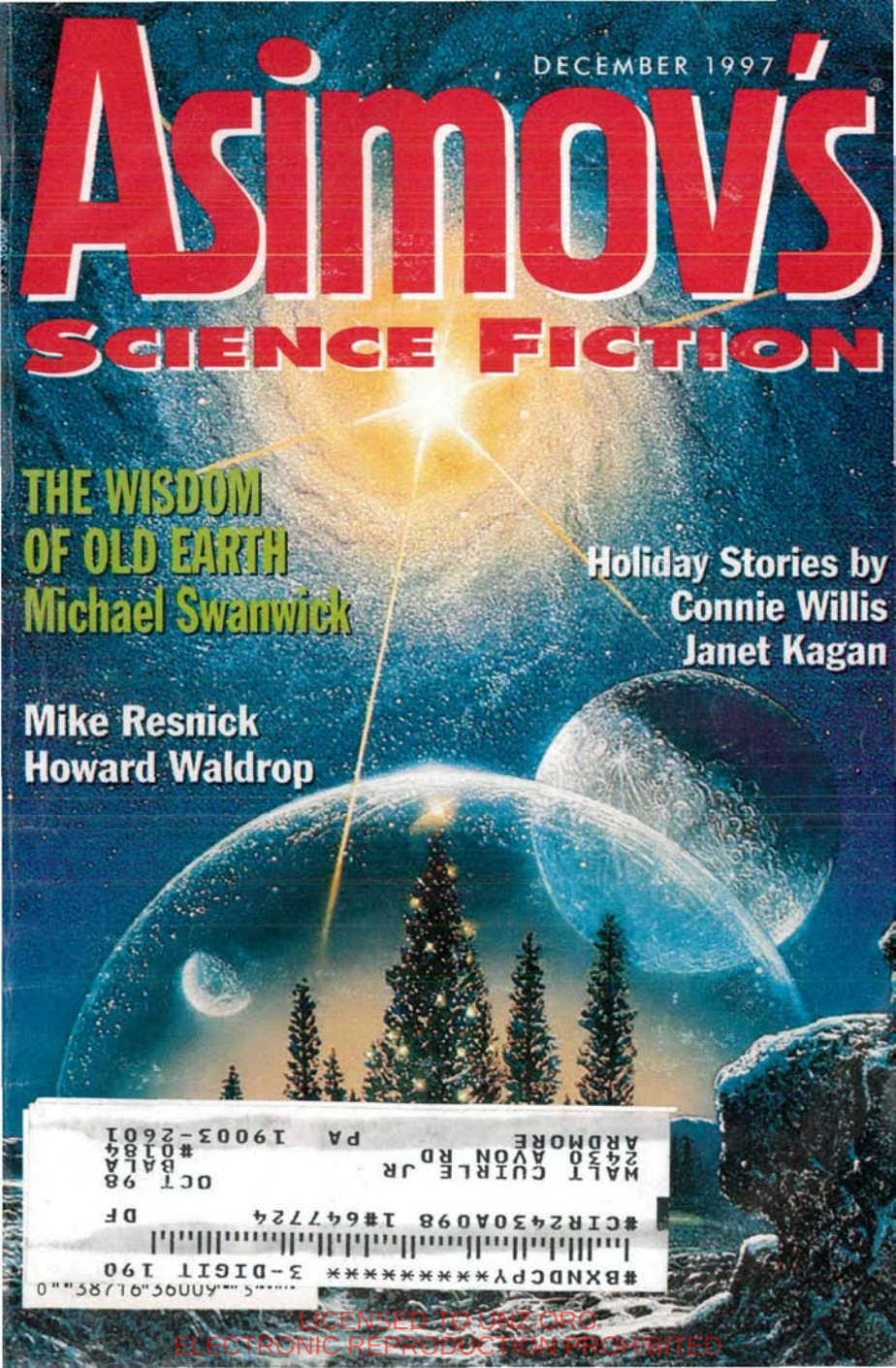

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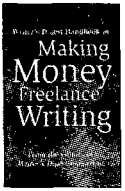

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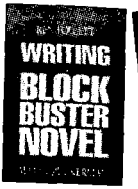

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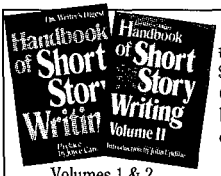

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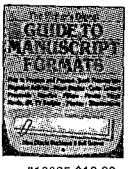

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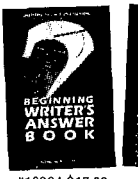

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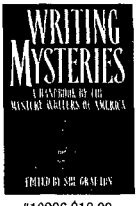

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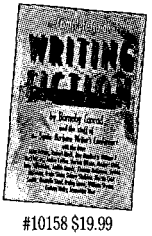

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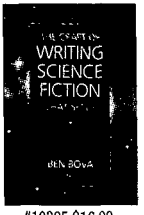

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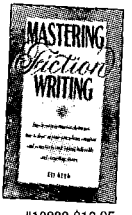

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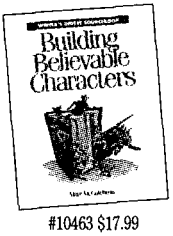

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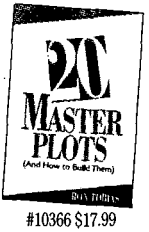

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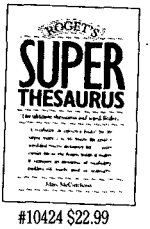

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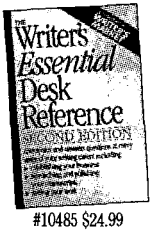

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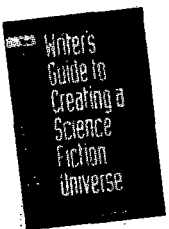

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

THE CASE OF THE RADIOACTIVE GOAT CHEESE

Berkeley, California, God bless it, is the world capital of anti-science Luddite know-nothing-ism. (To turn a nice triple redundancy!) Berkeley is to hysterical ignorance as Vatican City is to Roman Catholicism, as Mecca is to Islam, as Seattle is to coffee. The town where I live happens to be just down the road from Berkeley, a five-minute drive away, and so I've been exposed to a considerable dose of Berkeleyoid nuttiness over the past quarter of a century. But even now the place has the capacity to surprise me with the intensity of its dread of anything that smacks of the laboratory.

I recall, for example, the hue and cry over the possibility that genetically improved tomatoes might be sold in Berkeley supermarkets. ("Frankenfood," they called it.) I remember the intensity with which the entire gene-splicing industry was driven from Berkeley's bosky dells, to the great profit and joy of the adjoining metropolis of Emeryville, which happily gathered in the exiled laboratories. I look back fondly on the shudders induced by the experimental release into the atmosphere of a genetically altered bacterium that would help farmers' crops resist frost. And, of course, there's the ongoing uproar about human cloning, which, to hear the Berkeleyites go on about it, is soon to be made mandatory everywhere, followed by the mandatory Kevorkianization of any clonees who might be in less than perfect health.

But the big radioactive goat-cheese fracas, uniting as it does Berkeley's fear of atomic particles and Berkeley's passionate devotion to fine dining, is right up there with all of those.

There is, in the lovely hills high above the Berkeley campus of the University of California, a research institution called the Ernest Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, operated by the University on behalf of the US Department of Energy. It is named for E.O. Lawrence (1901-1958), the scientist who invented the cyclotron, and used to be known as the Lawrence Radiation Laboratory (the "Rad Lab") until the University officials realized that the local frenzy about anything nuclear made it politically advisable to adopt a less inflammatory name.

Lawrence's cyclotron—which brought him the Nobel Prize in 1939 and resulted later in having artificial element 103 named for him, Lawrentium—was instrumental in the development of the atomic bomb. Plutonium was first isolated in his Berkeley laboratory, and he was deeply involved in the

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work that produced the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs. But he was also concerned with medical research. As far back as 1936, he demonstrated the effectiveness of neutron bombardment in destroying malignant tissues, and a few years later pioneered the use of radioisotopes in medical diagnosis.

Medical research continues to this day at the Lawrence Laboratory. For the past thirty years a small group of scientists at the lab has been inserting atoms of radioactive tritium into ordinary molecules. These tracer molecules can then be used to trace the movements of drugs through cells and organs—drugs that combat cancer, AIDS, and other diseases.

The quantity of radiation accidentally released into the Berkeley environment by this laboratory during the course of its work is trivial, as is true of the Lawrence facility in general. Federal safety standards are rigidly observed there, and constant effort is made to reduce the already trifling emission of radioactivity from the lab. Imagine the astonishment of the researchers, then, when a Berkeley group called the Committee to Minimize Toxic Waste suddenly demanded last year that the tiny National Tritium Labeling Facility at the Lawrence Lab be shut down, and the Berkeley City Council immediately seconded the motion.

The four tritium researchers, declared one fervent Berkeleyite, were nothing more than "piano players in a nuclear whorehouse." At a public meeting, their work

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was denounced as "the moral equivalent of nuclear terrorism." The topper came from sixty-six-year-old Gene Bernardi, a lifelong Berkeley resident and co-chairman of the Toxic Waste committee, who took passionate issue with the venting of tritium from a tall pipe at the lab. Children play in a nearby park, she observed, and will take in tritium atoms with every breath they draw. Local residents grow vegetables in their gardens for home consumption. Their tomatoes and Swiss chard will be contaminated. And, worst of all, goats are allowed to graze in the hills adjacent to the laboratory in order to control the poison oak that grows there. What if someone were to make goat cheese from their milk, she asked, goat cheese being a particular dining favorite in Berkeley, *and the cheese turned out to be radioactive?*

There is only one solution, said Gene Bernardi. "We want that laboratory closed immediately, and permanently."

The scientists were caught off guard. Tritium, a radioactive isotope of hydrogen, does indeed give off beta particles. Betas don't have a lot of zip—they can't even pass through a sheet of paper—but if a quantity of tritium were somehow to get inside someone's body, by ingesting, say, radioactive goat cheese, it could *possibly* cause cancer. Possibly.

Cholesterol-conscious Berkeleyites, though, eat their goat cheese by the sliver, not the pound. And it would take a lot of tritium to do any harm—quite a good deal more than emerges from the thirty-foot-high vent at the Lawrence Lab. Said Dr. Glenn Prestwich of the department of medicinal chemistry at the University of Utah, which makes much use of the tritium produced at Lawrence in its research, "The tritium load that anybody could get from this is just undetectable. It wouldn't hurt you if you breathed it right out of the stack." And David McGraw, who is in charge of environmental health and safety at the Lawrence Lab, declared, "Is this safe? I'd say so absolutely." He calculates that someone who spends an entire year next to that stack would take in no more than .004 percent radiation beyond that which he would otherwise absorb from other sources, such as the atmosphere or ordinary drinking water.

But why should anyone believe these cynical, diabolical scientists? Does the fact that they are willing to expose themselves to killer overdoses of tritium every day matter at all? Everyone in Berkeley knows that nuclear scientists are so devoted to their ghastly science that their own safety means nothing to them, and the safety of others, of course, means even less.

One could, of course, point out that federal drinking-water standards allow twenty thousand picocuries of radioactivity (from *natural* sources—the stuff is all around us, and always has been!) per liter of water, and the radioactivity content of Chicken Creek, which runs close to the Lawrence Lab, has never been higher than six percent of that amount.

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Who sets these standards, though? How can they *know* that twenty thousand picocuries per liter is safe? Why should there be *any* radioactivity anywhere around us, at least in our fair city? As David McGraw says, "They [the opposition] want no dose at all." And, adds Dr. Prestwich of Utah, "Some people in Berkeley don't want to admit this, but everything has a risk." Obviously he doesn't consider the risk of tritium contamination very much of a threat to his personal body, nor do any of the other researchers. As one former Lawrence staffer said, "If it was that dangerous, none of us would do it. None of us are stupid, and biologists—everyone that I know—do work that relies in part on radioisotope studies."

But there is no scientific argument so reasonable that it can't be countered by a well-thought-out emotion-based countercharge. Janice Thomas, another member of the Committee to Minimize Toxic Waste, replies to all attempts at defending the tritium research with the simple, unanswerable argument that researchers willing to work with tritium "wouldn't be the first scientists to be in denial, to be the first scientists to get cancer, or infertility." And, indeed, plenty of scientists working with radioactivity have paid high prices for their scientific curiosity, right back to Madame Curie, whose death from leukemia in 1934 was beyond much doubt the direct result of her prolonged exposure to high-energy radiation.

But tritium doesn't produce the kind of high-energy radiation that killed Madame Curie. What it does produce, at least at the Lawrence Lab, is knowledge that helps researchers find better ways of coping with diseases that *do* quite definitely kill people. Even nice wholesome Berkeley people who carry Geiger counters to Berkeley's excellent restaurants in order to test their goat cheese for radioactivity do sometimes come down with cancer, or AIDS, or hormonal malfunctions, or various other nasty things that have nothing to do with exposure to tritium. And even good Berkeley folks who endeavor to lead pure, risk-free lives do eventually die of *something*. That's the rule in this world, so far, and forming a Committee to Minimize the Necessity of Human Mortality will not do much about altering it.

Nevertheless, life in Berkeley is nothing if not political, and so the outcry of the Committee on Toxic Waste will get the full attention of the appropriate officials. An outside review team made up of delegates from state and local health departments and the federal Environmental Protection Agency will duly be assembled, and a good many thousands of the taxpayers' dollars will be spent, and the four hapless scientists at the National Tritium Labeling Facility will spend a few months wondering whether they will have to move their establishment somewhere else. And then word will go forth that everything is okay up there, and we will all (except Gene Bernardi, I betcha) feel safe eating goat cheese again.

Ah, Berkeley! Ah, sweet idiocy! ●

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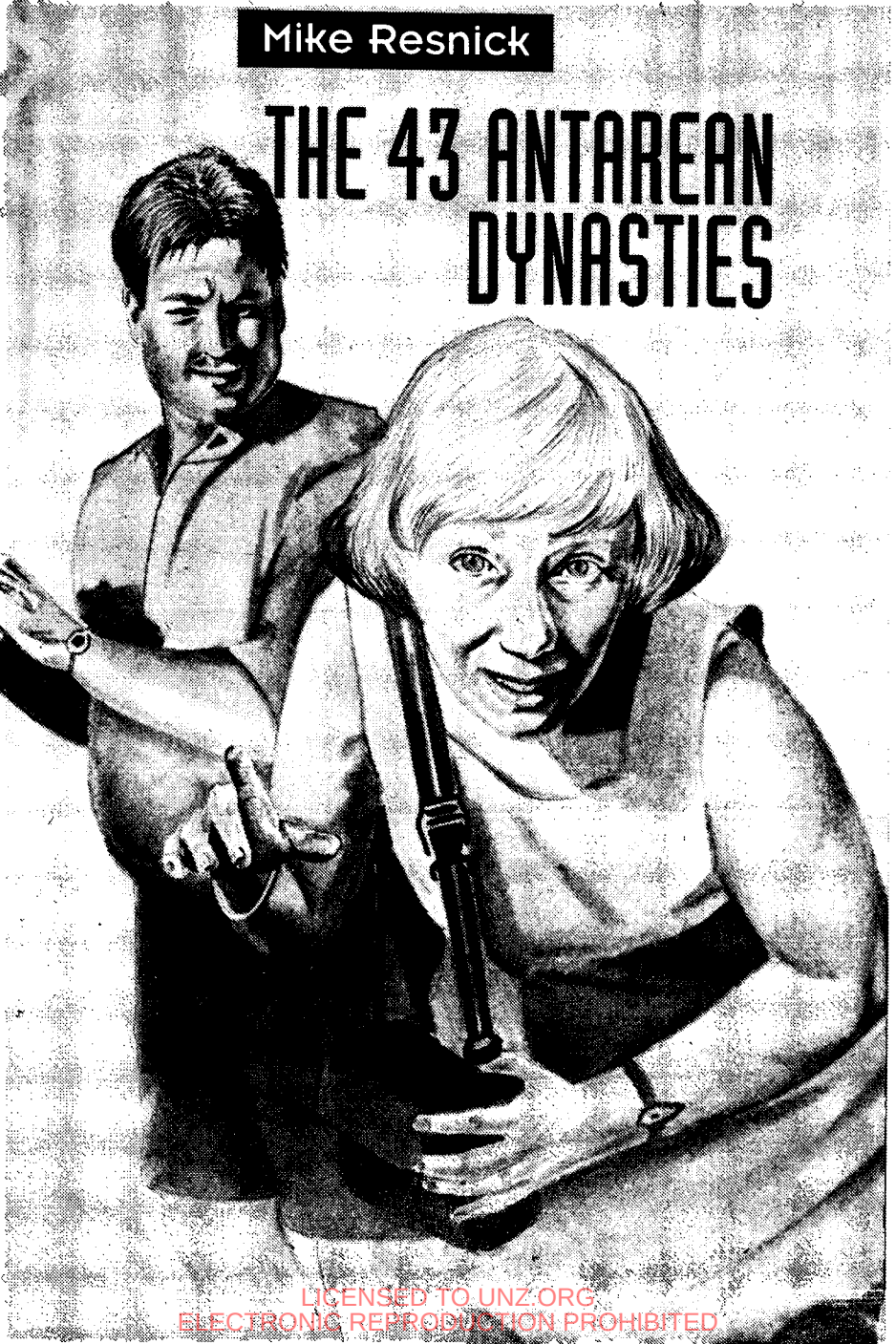
Mike Resnick

THE 43 ANTAREAN DYNASTIES



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Mike Resnick's remarkable new tale of the far future was inspired by the author's own travels to antique lands. This moving story of colossal wrecks and shattered visages is his sixteenth tale for *Asimov's*. Like ten of the first fifteen, it just may end up on the Hugo ballot.

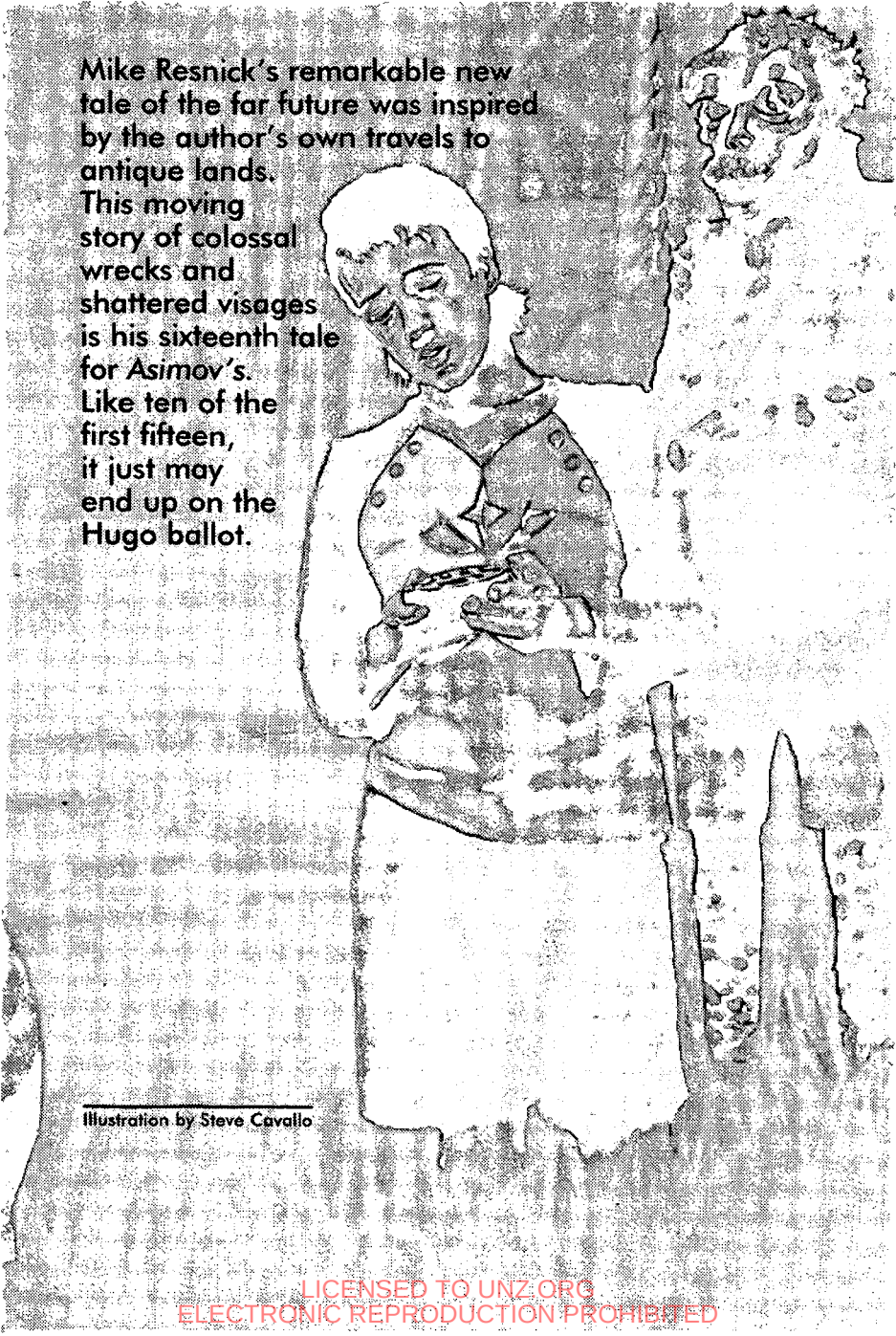

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

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To thank the Maker of All Things for the birth of his first male offspring, the Emperor Maloth IV ordered his architects to build a temple that would forever dwarf all other buildings on the planet. It was to be made entirely of crystal, and the spire-covered roof, which looked like a million glistening spear-points aimed at the sun, would be supported by 217 columns, to honor his 217 forebears. When struck, each column would sound a musical note that could be heard for kilometers, calling the faithful to prayer.

The structure would be known as the Temple of the Honored Sun, for his heir had been born exactly at midday, when the sun was highest in the sky. The temple took twenty-seven Standard years to complete, and although races from all across the galaxy would come to Antares III to marvel at it, Maloth further decreed that no aliens or non-believers would ever be allowed to enter it and desecrate its sacred corridors with their presence. . . .

A man, a woman, and a child emerge from the Temple of the Honored Sun. The woman holds a camera to her eye, capturing the same image from a dozen unimaginative angles. The child, his lip sparsely covered with hair that is supposed to imply maturity, never sees beyond the game he is playing on his pocket computer. The man looks around to make sure no one is watching him, grinds out a smokeless cigar beneath his heel, and then increases his pace until he joins them.

They approach me, and I will myself to become one with my surroundings, to insinuate myself into the marble walls and stone walkways before they can speak to me.

I am invisible. You cannot see me. You will pass me by.

"Hey, fella—we're looking for a guide," says the man. "You interested?"

I stifle a sigh and bow deeply. "I am honored," I say, glad that they do not understand the subtleties of Antarean inflection.

"Wow!" exclaims the woman, aiming her camera at me. "I never saw anything like that! It's almost as if you folded your torso in half! Can you do it again?"

I am reminded of an ancient legend, possibly apocryphal though I choose to believe it. An ambassador who was equally fascinated by the way the Antarean body is jointed once asked Komarith I, the founder of the Thirty-Eighth Dynasty, to bow a second time. Komarith merely stared at him without moving until the embarrassed ambassador slunk away. He went on to rule for twenty-nine years and was never known to bow again.

It has been a long time since Komarith, almost seven millennia now, and Antares and the universe have changed. I bow for the woman while she snaps her holographs.

"What's your name?" asks the man.

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"You could not pronounce it," I reply. "When I conduct members of your race, I choose the name Hermes."

"Herman, eh?"

"Hermes," I correct him.

"Right. Herman."

The boy finally looks up. "He said Hermes, Dad."

The man shrugs. "Whatever." He looks at his timepiece. "Well, let's get started."

"Yeah," chimes in the child. "They're piping in the game from Roosevelt III this afternoon. I've got to get back for it."

"You can watch sports anytime," says the woman. "This may be your only chance to see Antares."

"I should be so lucky," he mutters, returning his attention to his computer.

I recite my introductory speech almost by rote. "Allow me to welcome you to Antares III, and to its capital city of Kalimetra, known throughout the galaxy as the City of a Million Spires."

"I didn't see any million spires when we took the shuttle in from the spaceport," says the child, whom I could have sworn was not listening. "A thousand or two, maybe."

"There was a time when there were a million," I explain. "Today only 16,304 remain. Each is made of quartz or crystal. In late afternoon, when the sun sinks low in the sky, they act as a prism for its rays, creating a flood of exotic colors that stretches across the thoroughfares of the city. Races have come from halfway across the galaxy to experience the effect."

"Sixteen thousand," murmurs the woman. "I wonder what happened to the rest?"

No one knew why Antareans found the spires so aesthetically pleasing. They towered above the cities, casting their shadows and their shifting colors across the landscape. Tall, delicate, exquisite, they reflected a unique grandness of vision and sensitivity of spirit. The rulers of Antares III spent almost thirty-eight thousand years constructing their million spires.

During the Second Invasion, it took the Canphorite armada less than two weeks to destroy all but 16,304 of them . . .

The woman is still admiring the spires that she can see in the distance. Finally she asks who built them, as if they are too beautiful to have been created by Antareans.

"The artisans and craftsmen of my race built everything you will see today," I answer.

"All by yourselves?"

"Is it so difficult for you to believe?" I ask gently.

"No," she says defensively. "Of course not. It's just that there's so *much* . . ."

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"Kalimetra was not created in a day or a year, or even a millennium," I point out. "It is the cumulative achievement of 43 Antarean Dynasties."

"So we're in the 43rd Dynasty now?" she asks.

It was Zelorean IX who officially declared Kalimetra to be the Eternal City. Neither war nor insurrection had ever threatened its stability, and even the towering temples of his forefathers gave every promise of lasting for all eternity. It was a Golden Age, and he could see no reason why it should not go on forever. . . .

"The last absolute ruler of the 43rd Dynasty has been dust for almost three thousand years," I explain. "Since then we have been governed by a series of conquerors, each alien race superseding the last."

"Thank goodness they didn't destroy your buildings," says the woman, turning to admire a water fountain, which for some reason appears to her to be a mystical alien artifact. She is about to take a holo when the child restrains her.

"It's just a goddamned water bubbler, Ma," he says.

"But it's fascinating," she says. "Imagine what kind of beings used it in ages past."

"Thirsty ones," says the bored child.

She ignores him and turns back to me. "As I was saying, it must be criminal to rob the galaxy of such treasures."

"Yeah, well *somebody* destroyed some buildings around here," interjects the child, who seems intent on proving someone wrong about something. "Remember the hole in the ground we saw over that way?" He points in the direction of the Footprint. "Looks like a bomb crater to me."

"You are mistaken," I explain, leading them over to it. "It has always been there."

"It's just a big sinkhole," says the man, totally unimpressed.

"It is worshipped by my people as the Footprint of God," I explain. "Once, many eons ago, Kalimetra was in the throes of a years-long drought. Finally Jorvash, our greatest priest, offered his own life if God would bring the rains. God replied that it would not rain until He wept again, and we had not yet suffered enough to bring forth His tears of compassion. But He promised that He would strike a bargain with Jorvash." I pause for effect, but the man is lighting another cigar and the child is concentrating on his pocket computer. "The next morning Jorvash was found dead inside his temple, while God had created this depression with His foot and filled it with water. It sustained us until He finally wept again."

The woman seems flustered. "Um . . . I hate to ask," she finally says, "but could you repeat that story? My recorder wasn't on."

The man looks uncomfortable. "She's always forgetting to turn the damned thing on," he explains, and flips me a coin. "For your trouble."

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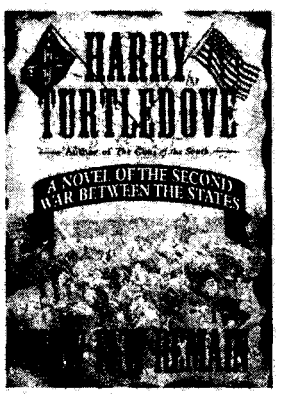

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Lobilia was the greatest poet in the history of Antares III. Although he died during the 23rd Dynasty, most of his work survived him. But his masterpiece, "The Long Night of the Exile"—the epic of Bagata's Exile and his triumphant Return—was lost forever.

Though he was his race's most famous bard, Lobilia himself was illiterate, unable even to write his own name. He created his poetry extemporaneously, embellishing upon it with each retelling. He recited his epic just once, and was so satisfied with its form that he refused to repeat it for the scribes who were waiting for a final version and hadn't written it down.

"Thank you," says the woman, deactivating the recorder after I finish. She pauses. "Can I buy a book with some more of your quaint folk legends?"

I decide not to explain the difference between a folk legend and an article of belief. "They are for sale in the gift shop of your hotel," I reply.

"You don't have enough books?" mutters the man.

She glares at him, but says nothing, and I lead them to the Tomb, which always impresses visitors.

"This is the Tomb of Bedorian V, the greatest ruler of the 37th Dynasty," I say. "Bedorian was a commoner, a simple farmer who deposed the notorious Maelastri XII, himself a mighty warrior who was the last ruler of the 36th Dynasty. It was Bedorian who decreed universal education for all Antareans."

"What did you have before that?"

"Our females were not allowed the privilege of literacy until Bedorian's reign."

"How did this guy finally die?" asks the man, who doesn't really care but is unwilling to let the woman ask all the questions.

"Bedorian was assassinated by one of his followers," I reply.

"A male, no doubt," says the woman wryly.

"Before he died," I continue, "he united three warring states without fighting a single battle, decreed that all Antareans should use a common language, and outlawed the worship of *kreneks*."

"What are *kreneks?*"

"They are poisonous reptiles. They killed many worshippers in nameless, obscene ceremonies before Bedorian IV came to power."

"Yeah?" says the child, alert again. "What were they like?"

"What is obscene to one being is simply boring to another," I say. "Terrans find them dull." Which is not true, but I have no desire to watch the child snicker as I describe the rituals.

"What a shame," says the woman, though her voice sounds relieved. "Still, you certainly seem to know your history."

I want to answer that I just make up the stories. But I am afraid if I say it, she will believe it.

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"Where did you learn all this stuff?" she continues.

"To become a licensed guide," I reply, "an Antarean must undergo fourteen years of study, and must also speak a minimum of four alien languages fluently. Terran is always one of the four."

"That's some set of credentials," comments the man. "I made it through one year of dental school and quit."

And yet, it is you who are paying me.

"I'm surprised you don't work at one of the local universities," he continues.

"I did once."

Which is true. But I have my family to feed—and tourists' tips, however small and grudgingly given, are still greater than my salary as a teacher.

A *rapu*—an Antarean child—insinuates his way between myself and my clients. Scarcely more than an infant, he is dressed in rags, and his face is smudged with dirt. There are open sores on the reticulated plates of his skin, and his golden eyes water constantly. He begs plaintively for credits in his native tongue. When there is no response, he extends his hand in what has become a universal gesture that says: *You are rich. I am poor and hungry. Give me money.*

"Yours?" asks the man, frowning, as his wife takes half a dozen holos in quick succession.

"No, he is not mine."

"What is he doing here?"

"He lives in the street," I answer, my compassion for the *rapu* alternating with my humiliation at having to explain his presence and situation. "He is asking for coins so that he and his mother will not go hungry tonight."

I look at the *rapu* and think sadly: *Timing is everything. Once, long ago, we strode across our world like gods. You would not have gone hungry in any of the 43 Dynasties.*

The human child looks at his Antarean counterpart. I wonder if he realizes how fortunate he is. His face gives no reflection of his thoughts; perhaps he has none. Finally he picks his nose and goes back to manipulating his computer.

The man stares at the *rapu* for a moment, then flips him a two-credit coin. The *rapu* catches it, bows and blesses the man, and runs off. We watch him go. He raises the coin above his head, yelling happily—and a moment later, we are surrounded by twenty more street urchins, all filthy, all hungry, all begging for coins.

"Enough's enough!" says the man irritably. "Tell them to get the hell out of here and go home, Herman."

"They live here," I explain gently.

"Right here?" demands the man. He stomps the ground with his foot,

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and the nearest *rapus* jump back in fright. "On this spot? Okay, then tell them to stay here where they live and not follow us."

I explain to the *rapus* in our own tongue that these tourists will not give them coins.

"Then we will go to the ugly pink hotel where all the Men stay and rob their rooms."

"That is none of my concern," I say. "But if you are caught, it will go hard with you."

The oldest of the urchins smiles at my warning.

"If we are caught, they will lock us up, and because it is a jail they will have to feed us, and we will be protected from the rain and the cold—it is far better than being here."

I have no answer for *rapus* whose only ambition is to be warm and dry and well-fed, so I merely shrug. They run off, laughing and singing, as if they are human children off to play some game.

"Damned aliens!" mutters the man.

"That is incorrect," I say.

"Oh?"

"A matter of semantics," I point out gently. "*They* are indigenous. *You* are the aliens."

"Well, they could do with some lessons in behavior from us aliens, then," he growls.

We walk up the long ramp to the Tomb and are about to enter it, when the woman stops.

"I'd like a holo of the three of you standing in the entrance," she announces. She smiles at me. "Just to prove to our friends we were here, and that we met a real Antarean."

The man walks over and stands on one side of me. The child reluctantly moves to my other side.

"Now put your arm around Herman," says the woman.

The child steps back, and I see a mixture of contempt and disgust on his face. "I'll pose with it, but I won't *touch* it!"

"You do what your mother says!" snaps the man.

"No way!" says the child, stalking sulkily back down the ramp. "You want to hug him, you go ahead!"

"You listen to me, young man!" says the man, but the child does not stop or give any indication that he has heard, and soon he disappears behind a temple.

It was Tcharock, the founder of the 30th Dynasty, who decreed that the person of the Emperor was sacrosanct and could not be touched by any being other than his medics and his concubines, and then only with his consent.

His greatest advisor was Chaluba, who extended Tcharock's rule to

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more than 80 percent of the planet and halted the hyper-inflation that had been the 29th Dynasty's legacy to him.

One night, during a state function, Chaluba inadvertently brushed against Tcharock while introducing him to the Ambassador from far Domar.

The next morning Tcharock regretfully gave the signal to the executioner, and Chaluba was beheaded. Despite this unfortunate beginning, the 30th Dynasty survived for 1,062 Standard years.

The woman, embarrassed, begins apologizing to me. But I notice that she, too, avoids touching me. The man goes off after the child, and a few moments later the two of them return—which is just as well, for the woman has begun repeating herself.

The man pushes the child toward me, and he sullenly utters an apology. The man takes an ominous step toward him, and he reluctantly reaches out his hand. I take it briefly—the contact is no more pleasant for me than for him—and then we enter the Tomb. Two other groups are there, but they are hundreds of meters away, and we cannot hear what their guides are saying.

"How high is the ceiling?" asks the woman, training her camera on the exquisite carvings overhead.

"It's 38 meters," I say. "The Tomb itself is 203 meters long and 67 meters wide. The body of Beldorian V is in a large vault beneath the floor." I pause, thinking as always of past glories. "On the Day of Mourning, the day the Tomb was completed, a million Antareans stood patiently in line outside the Tomb to pay their last respects."

"I don't mean to ask a silly question," says the woman, "but why are all the buildings so *enormous*?"

"Ego," suggests the man, confident in his wisdom.

"The Maker of All Things is huge," I explain. "So my people felt that any monuments to Him should be as large as possible, so that He might be comfortable inside them."

"You think your God can't find or fit into a small building?" asks the man with a condescending smile.

"He is everyone's God," I answer. "And while He can of course find a small temple, why should we force Him to live in one?"

"Did Beldorian have a wife?" asks the woman, her mind back to smaller considerations.

"He had five of them," I answer. "The tomb next to this one is known as The Place of Beldorian's Queens."

"He was a polygamist?"

I shake my head. "No. Beldorian simply outlived his first four queens."

"He must have died a very old man," says the woman.

"He did not," I answer. "There is a belief among my people that those

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who achieve public greatness are doomed to private misery. Such was Beldorian's fate." I turn to the child, who has been silent since returning, and ask him if he has any questions, but he merely glares at me without speaking.

"How long ago was this place built?" asks the man.

"Beldorian V died 6,302 Standard years ago. It took another seventeen years to build and prepare the Tomb."

"Hmm, 6,302 years," he muses. "That's a long time."

"We are an ancient race," I reply proudly. "A human anthropologist has suggested that our 3rd Dynasty commenced before your ancestors crossed over the evolutionary barrier into sentience."

"Maybe we spent a long time living in the trees," says the man, clearly unimpressed and just a bit defensive. "But look how quickly we passed you once we climbed down."

"If you say so," I answer noncommittally.

"In fact, everybody passed you," he persists. "Look at the record: How many times has Antares been conquered?"

"I am not sure," I lie, for I find it humiliating to speak of it.

When the Antareans learned that Man's Republic wished to annex their world, they gathered their army in Zanthu and then marched out onto the battlefield, three hundred thousand strong. They were the cream of the planet's young warriors, gold of eye, the reticulated plates of their skin glistening in the morning sun, prepared to defend their homeworld.

The Republic sent a single ship that flew high overhead and dropped a single bomb, and in less than a second there was no longer an Antarean army, or a city of Zanthu, or a Great Library of Cthstoka.

Over the millennia Antares was conquered four times by Man, twice by the Canphor Twins, and once each by Lodin XI, Emra, Ramor, and the Sett Empire. It was said that the parched ground had finally quenched its thirst by drinking a lake of Antarean blood.

As we leave the Tomb, we come to a small, skinny *rapu*. He sits on a rock, staring at us with his large, golden eyes, his expression rapt in contemplation.

The human child pointedly ignores him and continues walking toward the next temple, but the adults stop.

"What a cute little thing!" enthuses the woman. "And he looks so hungry." She digs into her shoulder bag and withdraws a sweet that she has kept from breakfast. "Here," she says, holding it up. "Would you like it?"

The *rapu* never moves. This is unique not only in the woman's experience, but also in mine, for he is obviously undernourished.

"Maybe he can't metabolize it," suggests the man. He pulls a coin out, steps over to the *rapu*, and extends his hand. "Here you go, kid."

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The *rapu,* his face frozen in contemplation, makes no attempt to grab the coin.

And suddenly I am thinking excitedly: *You disdain their food when you are hungry, and their money when you are poor. Could you possibly be the One we have awaited for so many millennia, the One who will give us back our former glory and initiate the 44th Dynasty?*

I study him intently, and my excitement fades just as quickly as it came upon me. The *rapu* does not disdain their food and their money. His golden eyes are clouded over. Life in the streets has so weakened him that he has become blind, and of course he does not understand what they are saying. His seeming arrogance comes not from pride or some inner light, but because he is not aware of their offerings.

"Please," I say, gently taking the sweet from the woman without coming into actual contact with her fingers. I walk over and place it in the *rapu's* hand. He sniffs it, then gulps it down hungrily and extends his hand, blindly begging for more.

"It breaks your heart," says the woman.

"Oh, it's no worse than what we saw on Bareimus V," responds the man. "They were every bit as poor—and remember that awful skin disease they all had?"

The woman considers, and her face reflects the unpleasantness of the memory. "I suppose you're right at that." She shrugs, and I can tell that even though the child is still in front of us, hand outstretched, she has already put him from her mind.

I lead them through the Garden of the Vanished Princes, with its tormented history of sacrifice and intrigue, and suddenly the man stops.

"What happened here?" he asks, pointing to a number of empty pedestals.

"History happened," I explain. "Or avarice, for sometimes they are the same thing." He seems confused, so I continue: "If any of our conquerors could find a way to transport a treasure back to his home planet, he did. Anything small enough to be plundered *was* plundered."

"And these statues that have been defaced?" he says, pointing to them. "Did you do it yourselves so they would be worthless to occupying armies?"

"No," I answer.

"Well, whoever did *that*"—he points to a headless statue—"ought to be strung up and whipped."

"What's the fuss?" asks the child in a bored voice. "They're just statues of aliens."

"Actually, the human who did that was rewarded with the governorship of Antares III," I inform them.

"What are you talking about?" says the man.

"The second human conquest of the Antares system was led by Com-

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mander Lois Kiboko," I begin. "She defaced or destroyed more than three thousand statues. Many were physical representations of our deity, and since she and her crew were devout believers in one of your religions, she felt that these were false idols and must be destroyed."

"Well," the man replies with a shrug, "it's a small price to pay for her saving you from the Lodinites."

"Perhaps," I say. "The problem is that we had to pay a greater price for each successive savior."

He stares at me, and there is an awkward silence. Finally I suggest that we visit the Palace of the Supreme Tyrant.

"You seem such a docile race," the woman says awkwardly. "I mean, so civilized and unaggressive. How did your gene pool ever create a real, honest-to-goodness tyrant?"

The truth is that our gene pool was considerably more aggressive before a seemingly endless series of alien conquests decimated it. But I know that this answer would make them uncomfortable, and could affect the size of my tip, so I lie to them instead. (I am ashamed to admit that lying to aliens becomes easier with each passing day. Indeed, I am sometimes amazed at the facility with which I can create falsehoods.)

"Every now and then each race produces a genetic sport," I say, and I can see she believes it, "and we Antareans are so docile, to use your expression, that this particular one had no difficulty achieving power."

"What was his name?"

"I do not know."

"I thought you took fourteen years' worth of history courses," she says accusingly, and I can tell she thinks I am lying to her, whereas every time I have actually lied she has believed me.

"Our language has many dialects, and they have all evolved and changed over thirty-six thousand years," I point out. "Some we have deciphered, but to this day many of them remain unsolved mysteries. In fact, right at this moment a team of human archaeologists is hard at work trying to uncover the Tyrant's name."

"If it's a dead language, how are they going to manage that?"

"In the days when your race was still planetbound, there was an artifact called the Rosetta Stone that helped you translate an ancient language. We have something similar—ours is known as the Bosperi Scroll—that comes from the Great Tyrant's era."

"Where is it?" asks the woman, looking around.

"I regret to inform you that both the archaeologists and the Bosperi Scroll are currently on Deluros VIII."

"Smart," says the man. "They can protect it better on Deluros."

"From who?" asks the woman.

"From anyone who wants to steal it, of course," he says, as if explaining it to a child.

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"But I mean, who would want to steal the key to a dead language?"

"Do you know what it would be worth to a collector?" answers the man. "Or a thief who wanted to ransom it?"

They discuss it further, but the simple truth is that it is on Deluros because it was small enough to carry, and for no other reason. When they are through arguing I tell her that it is because they have devices on Deluros that will bring back the faded script, and she nods her head thoughtfully.

We walk another 400 meters and come to the immense Palace of the Kings. It is made entirely of gold, and becomes so hot from the rays of the sun that one can touch the outer surface only at night. This was the building in which all the rulers of the 7th through the 12th Dynasties resided. It was from here that my race received the Nine Proclamations of Ascendancy, and the Charter of Universal Rights, and our most revered document, the Mabelian Declaration.

It was a wondrous time to have lived, when we had never tasted defeat and all problems were capable of solution, when stately caravans plied their trade across secure boundaries and monarchs were just and wise, when each day brought new triumphs and the future held infinite promise.

I point to the broken and defaced stone chair. "Once there were 246 jewels and precious stones embedded in the throne."

The child walks over to the throne, then looks at me accusingly. "Where are they?" he demands.

"They were all stolen over the millennia," I reply.

"By conquerors, of course," offers the woman with absolute certainty.

"Yes," I say, but again I am lying. They were stolen by my own people, who traded them to various occupying armies for food or the release of captive loved ones.

We spend a few more minutes examining the vanished glory of the Palace of the Kings, then walk out the door and approach the next crumbling structure. It is the Hall of the Thinkers, revered to this day by all Antareans, but I know they will not understand why a race would create such an edifice to scholarship, and I haven't the energy to explain, so I tell them that it is the Palace of the Concubines, and of course they believe me. At one point the child, making no attempt to mask his disappointment, asks why there are no statues or carvings showing the concubines, and I think very quickly and explain that Lois Kiboko's religious beliefs were offended by the sexual frankness of the artifacts and she had them all destroyed.

I feel guilty about this lie, for it is against the Code of Just Behavior to suggest that a visitor's race may have offended in any way. Ironically, while the child voices his disappointment, I notice that none of the three seems to have a problem accepting that another human would destroy

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millennia-old artwork that upset his sensibilities. I decide that since they feel no guilt, this one time I shall feel none either. (But I still do. Tradition is a difficult thing to transcend.)

I see the man anxiously walking around, looking into corners and behind pedestals, and I ask him if something is wrong.

"Where's the can?" he says.

"I beg your pardon?"

"The can. The bathroom. The lavatory." He frowns. "Didn't any of these goddamned concubines ever have to take a crap?"

I finally discern what he wants and direct him to a human facility that has been constructed just beyond the Western Door.

He returns a few minutes later, and I lead them all outside, past the towering Onyx Obelisk that marked the beginning of the almost-forgotten 4th Dynasty. We stop briefly at the Temple of the River of Light, which was constructed *over* the river, so that the sacred waters flow through the temple itself.

We leave and turn a corner, and suddenly a single structure completely dominates the landscape.

"What's *that?*" asks the woman.

"That is the Spiral Ramp to Heaven," I answer.

"What a fabulous name!" she enthuses. "I just know a fabulous story goes with it!" She turns to me expectantly.

"There was a time, before our scientists knew better, that people thought you could reach heaven if you simply built a tall enough ramp."

The child guffaws.

"It is true," I continue. "Construction was begun during the 2nd Dynasty, and continued for more than 700 years until midway through the 3rd. It looks as if you can see the top from here, but you actually are looking only at the bottom half of it. The rest is obscured by clouds."

"How high does it go?" asked the woman.

"More than nine kilometers," I say. "Three kilometers higher than our tallest mountain."

"Amazing!" she exclaims.

"Perhaps you would like a closer look at it?" I suggest. "You might even wish to climb the first kilometer. It is a very gentle ascent until you reach the fifth kilometer."

"Yes," she replies happily. "I think I'd like that very much."

"I'm not climbing anything," says the man.

"Oh, come on," she urges him. "It'll be fun!"

"The air's too thin and the gravity's too heavy and it's too damned much like work. One of these days *I'm* going to choose our itinerary, and I promise you it won't involve so goddamned much walking."

"Can we go back and watch the game?" asks the child eagerly.

The man takes one more look at the Spiral Ramp to Heaven.

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"Yeah," he says. "I've seen enough. Let's go back."

"We really should finish the tour," says the woman. "We'll probably never be in this sector of the galaxy again."

"So what? It's just another backwater world," replies the man. "Don't tell your friends about the Stairway to the Stars or whatever the hell it's called and they'll never know you missed it."

Then the woman comes up with what she imagines will be the clinching argument. "But you've already agreed to pay for the tour."

"So we'll cut it short and pay him half as much," says the man. "Big deal."

The man pulls a wad of credits out of his pocket and peels off three ten-credit notes. Then he pauses, looks at me, pockets them, and presses a fifty-credit note into my hand instead.

"Ah, hell, you kept your end of the bargain, Herman," he says. Then he and the woman and child begin walking back to the hotel.

The first aliens ever to visit Antares were rude and ill-mannered barbarians, but Perganian II, the greatest Emperor of the 31st Dynasty, decreed that they must be treated with the utmost courtesy. When the day of their departure finally arrived, the aliens exchanged farewells with Perganian, and one of them thrust a large, flawless blue diamond into the Emperor's hand in payment for his hospitality.

After the aliens left the courtyard, Perganian let the diamond drop to the ground, declaring that no Antarean could be purchased for any price.

The diamond lay where it had fallen for three generations, becoming a holy symbol of Antarean dignity and independence. It finally vanished during a dust storm and was never seen again. ●

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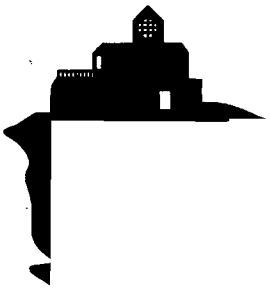
BAD DREAMS



The widow in the clifftop house
who never wears shoes
who never brushes her hair
walks the night a frequent phantom
Her rapidly cooling thoughts
form the bad dreams
of insomniacs
"You are dead" she whispers
and to the sleepless
ordinary things look strange,
the act of love
becomes a theft
In beds so sweet they are
fatal retreats
the tossers and turners
doze and dream of virgin water
slipping over river stones
out of reach
the button passing through
the buttonhole
peeking through like a frightened flower
They dream huddled in the black hold
of her ship
How she traced her husband's still face
with eyeshadow
How the dead of night punished her
until all values were forgotten
If they can send men to the moon
she thinks
my love can make a similar voyage
and return to me
Her decrepit body
has grown these dreams
hidden hopeless diaphanous
and they collect around her
like cliffs
in a grave of love.

—Wendy Rathbone

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Janet Kagan

Janet Kagan's last tale for us was the Hugo-award winning Christmas story of "The Nutcracker Coup" (December 1992). After far too long an absence, she rings in the holiday season once again with a heart-warming tale about what it means to be . . .

STANDING IN THE SPIRIT

Molly Rose Hawkins was angry at Christmas. Imagine! Only twenty-three and already angry at Christmas, at the whole damn dog-and-pony show of it. Her anger, kindled in mid-November, was slow and smoldering. It reddened her cheeks, made her eyes seem as blue as the burning of a gas flame, and pursed her lips.

Perhaps she thought that she pursed her lips in disapproval, but you might have thought differently had you been a young man of the same age. What Molly Rose thought disapproving looked to those around her much like an invitation to a kiss.

With much effort, she had kept her temper throughout the Christmas shopping season and had been courteous even to customers who were whiny, mean-spirited, and (all too often) nasty. Christmas was especially hard on younger children these days, and she had no desire to add to their woes. For them, she conjured smiles and conjured smiles from them in return.

Perhaps it was the invited kiss that caused the young man to hand her an engraved card and say, smiling, "I know Christmas is an odd day for an art opening, but it's odd art. I suspect you've got someone special you'll be spending the time with, but maybe you'll both drop by. Heather even found us a recipe for smoking bishop—that's hot red wine poured over bitter oranges, with spices and sugar to suit—and it's guaranteed to raise the spirits. . . ."

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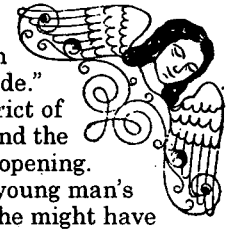

"A DICKENS OF A CHRISTMAS," read the card, in quite lovely Old English type, "Being an Exhibition of the Fine Art of Raising Ghosts at Christmas-Tyde." The address was a loft-gallery in a run-down district of town (the very district in which Molly Rose lived), and the card would admit two to the private Christmas Day opening.

Any other day, Molly Rose might have taken the young man's card as the sort of shy pass it was. Any other day, she might have found a way to say she had no date for Christmas Day, nor any prospects. But the store was crowded. Behind the young man, an exasperated mother said to the two-year-old at her feet, "Stop that whining, Lizzie," all too sharply.

The young man stepped aside and gestured the mother to the counter. "I'm in no rush," he said, either to the mother or to Molly Rose.

Lizzie wailed again; Lizzie's mom seemed about to wail as well. Molly Rose leaned over the counter and gave Lizzie a genuine smile. "Hey, Lizzie," she said, patting the countertop. "Come up here and see all the pretty things." To Lizzie's mom, she said, "Down there, there's nothing to see but knees and feet. When the store's this crowded, that's not just boring—it's more than a little scary."

The mother's expression softened just a little; she lifted the child onto the counter. "Hi!" said Molly Rose. "What can I do for you and your mom?"

Lizzie took in Molly Rose, took in the young man. (He smiled at her too.) She sniveled. She might have wailed again but for the rack of silk scarves beside the register. In the face of so much color, Lizzie smiled, all wide eyes and reaching hands, her grief forgotten.

Mama sighed and spit-cleaned Lizzie's face. Her voice darkened. "I need a scarf for somebody who will hate whatever I choose."

"Oh, my," said Molly Rose, as if to say she knew the type. "Maybe you'd do better to get a gift certificate—"

The woman shook her head. "It would be from the wrong store." She looked close to tears. Lizzie crowed, tipped herself onto hands and knees, and crawled toward all that color. Mama's hands shot out to stop her.

"I have an idea," said Molly Rose. "Is the scarf for a relative of Lizzie's?"

Grappling with the two-year-old, the mother nodded. "My-sister-the-bitch." It was all one word the way she said it.

"Then let Lizzie pick the gift." She pulled a handful of scarves from the rack and fluttered them through the air before the child's avid eyes. "What do you say, Lizzie? What color for your aunt?"

Before they were done, they'd chosen three: a shocking orange and gold for Lizzie's aunt, pale green for Lizzie's mama, and a small scarf of swirling coral-and-cream for Lizzie, who approved the flavor quite as much as the color.

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As Molly Rose made change, Lizzie's mama glared suddenly at the invitation propped beside the register. She snapped, "Do you *like* Dickens?"

The question was so at odds with the tone that all Molly Rose could say was, "Yes, ma'am, very much," as she handed the woman her receipt.

"*Here* then. They're for tomorrow; the show sold out two months ago. *Every* show sold out two months ago." The woman slapped a ticket envelope onto the counter and shoved it at Molly Rose. "My-sister-the-bitch said she hated Dickens and I should take the tickets back and pick another play, and I'll be damned if I'll play that game again *this* year."

With that, she gathered Lizzie and her packages and stalked through the crowd toward the exit doors before Molly Rose had so much as a chance to call out, "Merry Christmas!" Lizzie smiled and waggled fingers at Molly Rose over mama's hunched and angry shoulder.

"Thanks for waiting," she said to the young man. She might have said more (he was a singularly nice young man, with singularly dreamy eyes) but there were more customers to be helped. So instead of asking him where he'd been all her life, she said, "Now, how can I help you?"

She helped him choose an inexpensive but very lovely oblong scarf of white lace. Given the crowd at her counter, she was grateful he hadn't asked her to wrap it for him. Between the next two customers, she wondered if he'd done it as a kindness to her or if he was simply the sort who preferred to wrap his own. Between the two customers after that, she decided he'd want to make his wrapping personal. As inexpensive as it was, that scarf was one of the most beautiful she'd seen. . . .

Some two hours later, on her ten-minute break, Molly Rose found that Lizzie's mama had given her two tickets to the new staging of *A Christmas Carol* that she'd been wild to see. Standing room was sold out and she hadn't dared risk the expense of a seat. She paused for a moment: if she went to the play, she probably wouldn't make it to the young man's art opening. She remembered his eyes.

A Christmas Carol or an actual cup of smoking bishop—such a choice should have been enough to pluck up her anger and root it out—but the day was not yet over. Before it was, she'd seen two more children slapped (for being exhausted, as far as she could make out), and another even dozen surly adults (she'd been snarled at, but so had everybody else working in the store).

But when a customer had threatened to have Elise, at the counter next to hers, *fired* (because the color he wanted was no longer in stock), she was angry at Christmas all over again: angry enough to desert her post. She found Elise in the ladies' room sobbing her heart out.

"They won't fire you, honey, I promise." Molly Rose laid her hands on

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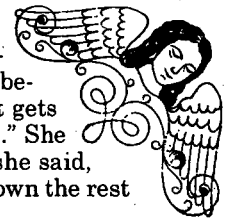

Elise's shoulders. The shakes from her sobs ran up Molly Rose's arms and across her shoulders, transmuted there to shaking anger. "I saw what happened between you and that Christmas goblin and if Helmut gets on your case, you send him to me. Come on now. . . ." She hugged and patted and when the shaking stilled, she said, "Now dry your eyes and let's get out there and face down the rest of the goblins."

Elise giggled; the giggle had a leftover hiccup from the sob in it, but it was a giggle nonetheless. "Goblins?"

"Sure. You look: they're always little pasty-faced things, been working in the mines, get let out at Christmas just to torment the rest of us. Skrinched up faces, beady eyes that never see daylight but once a year. Either that or something about Christmas goblinates some people. There's nothing to be done about it and if we're lucky, they'll un-goblinate after New Year's."

"Oh, dear," said Elise. "He *did* look like a goblin, didn't he?" This time the giggle was soft and warm.

"Yup, and the only thing that scares a goblin is a smile."

Elise smiled.

"That'll get 'em, girl," said Molly Rose, and on impulse offered her the spare ticket to Dickens' performance.

"That's family night," Elise said. "I can't make it."

There was something in the way she looked at the ticket. "But," said Molly Rose, knowing she was right, "*but* you know somebody who'd love to see this." Yes, she was right.

Elise made one shot, obligatory, at returning the ticket, but Molly Rose held up her hands. "Honey," she said, "the author is a friend of mine—has been since I was a kid. Think of this as me doing my bit to promote his work. You see that ticket gets into the right hands, and a Merry Christmas to you."

"God bless," said Elise and, seeming genuinely cheered, she went out to face the goblinated.

Molly Rose sighed, and, from force of habit, pulled a scrap of paper from her pocket and jotted down the word "goblinated." She looked at her own face in the grimy mirror. "Smile," she commanded. "Even your editor knows you're 'relentlessly upbeat.'" Her image stared balefully out at her, goblinated as the worst of them, and she knew in her heart of hearts there'd be no Christmas story this year.

The last few years she'd made enough with her writing that she hadn't had to part-time at Christmas, and, by staying out of the stores when folks seemed at their most frantic, she'd avoided the worst aspects of the holiday. Come March, she'd have recovered from the few really nasty encounters she'd been a witness to (after all, one could hardly avoid nasti-

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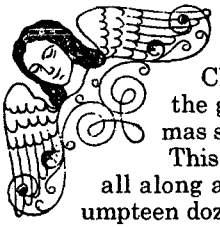

ness—it was simply that it seemed nastier because of the time of year) and then she'd play her favorite Christmas music for a few weeks, and, thus restored to the genuine spirit of Christmas, she'd write her Christmas story for the *next* year's magazines.

This year, it wasn't going to happen. It'd been a lousy year all along and none of her writing had gone well. She had an umpteen dozen half-stories and she'd failed to finish a novel, and now she wouldn't even be able to write her Christmas story come March. "And, if you can't write, you might as well put on a happy face and get out there and do your job," she told her image, "because you're gonna need this job reference."

With that parting shot, she pursed her lips, grabbed hold, and dragged herself back into the tinsel and raucousness of the Christmas Village. The evening wore on, the crowd got thicker, and Molly Rose's smile wore thinner, but she kept it as best she could.

And then the day was over at last, and she fought the subways, where folks seemed even surlier, and breathed with relief the bitter chill of the air as she emerged from under the ground. She jammed on her gloves, noticing once more how tattered the cuffs of her coat had become. Well, it'd last two more years, at least. Shabby it might be, but it was proof against the cold.

She peeled back the cuff to read her watch—ten-thirty on the dot—and she hurried her steps, pushing against the wind. Yes, there was Mrs. Eleanor, checking out the trash can on the corner of 2nd and 83rd, right on schedule.

Molly Rose had been curious enough to watch for a few evenings, and knew that Mrs. Eleanor did the rounds as reliably as a neighborhood cat might. She'd once made the mistake of offering Mrs. Eleanor a container of Chinese food and had been soundly and haughtily chastised. How *dare* Molly Rose presume! Mrs. Eleanor, it seemed, was only out walking her dog, Susie.

There was no dog. Molly Rose wondered if once there had been.

At any rate, Molly Rose had gotten stubborn and prideful in her own way. Now she ducked into the space between the two buildings at this end of the street and set the shopping bag that she carried in the only ray of streetlamp-light that penetrated the gloom. Since they'd given her the job of cleaning the employees' fridge, she'd damn well see the leftovers went to good use. (Well, maybe—she had no real way of knowing if Mrs. Eleanor would take them. But if Mrs. Eleanor didn't, somebody else who needed them might.)

She nipped out of the alleyway just in time and zipped back the way she'd come, around the corner of 82nd toward her own building. The blast of icy air almost knocked her over when she hit the patch of ice from the

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broken hydrant in front of Harry's Barbershop (now closed forever), but she worked her way up the four steps and rummaged in her pocket for her keys.

As she pulled off her glove, cursing the icy keys and the icy lock and the icy wind and *Christmas*, Mrs. Eleanor rounded the corner. She was carrying the shopping bag. "Thank you," Molly Rose whispered to nobody in particular. Aloud, she said, "Good evening, Mrs. Eleanor. 'Evening, Susie. You've been shopping, I see."

Mrs. Eleanor smiled and lifted the bag an inch. "Christmas is so rushed," she said. "You know how it is. *Stay*, Susie."

She stood in the lamplight, and Molly Rose, watching Mrs. Eleanor, could almost see the little dog tug with excitement at the end of her leash. Mrs. Eleanor wore a dozen or so ratty old sweaters—not enough for a night like this. Pinned to the outermost of these was a bright red ribbon.

"I see you're all gussied up tonight," Molly Rose said. If Mrs. Eleanor could be "brave in ribbons," she could damn well be brave too. Mrs. Eleanor would have her head otherwise.

"'Tis the season," said Mrs. Eleanor. "Merry Christmas, dear."

"And God bless us every one," Molly Rose said. Then she added sternly, "You'd better get Susie out of this wind before she takes a chill. Merry Christmas to you too, Susie," she called as afterthought. As she turned back to the door, she was suddenly blinded by her own tears. She found the lock by the sheer cold of it, and when she closed herself inside, she could just make out Mrs. Eleanor, gone across the street to check the garbage cans beside Bemeli's Grocery. She held the wriggling Susie in her arms now, and Molly Rose was bone-sure that Susie sniffed out the good containers for her.

Then Molly Rose did at last burst into tears. Damn the little ghoul in the back of her head for making stories out of other people's tragedies! She fumbled with the interior lock, got it open against all odds, and went sprawling over a package laid dead-center of the long entryway. The shock of falling startled her from her tears, and she grabbed up the package, hoping she hadn't broken somebody's Christmas gift.

She hadn't. Or at least she hadn't broken somebody *else's* Christmas gift—it was addressed to her. Scribbled on the package was a note from the man in 1A: "I didn't want you to pass this by: you always assume the packages are for somebody else. Your Uncle Oscar sends hugs and he's sorry he missed you."

Molly Rose climbed the two long flights of stairs to her apartment, to be welcomed home by Mary and JayCee. She fed them first.

Exactly one year ago to the day, a lovely little gray tabby had come up to her on the street and inquired, Had she need of a cat?

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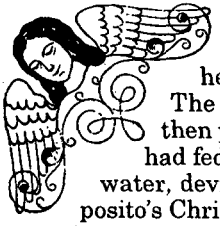

Until that moment, Molly Rose hadn't known she had. "Come on," she'd said, and the cat had followed her down the block to her building, in, up the stairs. The cat had checked the apartment, nook and cranny, then plumped herself in front of the fridge, and Molly Rose had fed her the leftover half can of tuna. She'd given the cat water, devised a makeshift cat-pan, and gone over to Tomi Esposito's Christmas party.

When she returned (with a formal cat-pan and supplies), she'd found the little gray tabby nested on her laundry bag, no longer plump and nursing a single newborn kitten. Since it was Christmas Eve, there was nothing she could do but call them Mary and JayCee.

As things had turned out, JayCee was also a female, but that was fine by Molly Rose, who thought them both the nicest Christmas present she'd received in many a year.

When they'd all eaten leftover stew from the fridge and when Molly Rose had described her day (and told them wistfully about the young man and angrily about the slapped children) and been well and truly soothed by purrs and stroppings, Molly Rose remembered the package. With luck, there'd be ribbon for Mary and tissue paper for JayCee. No luck needed invoking—the package was from Uncle Oscar, after all, who worked in the rag trade and loved effects and knew the cats' tastes as well as hers.

"Dear Molly Rose," read the note (in Uncle Oscar's lovely copperplate hand), "A few years ago, one of your characters said wistfully that there were colors she'd never seen the dye-makers capture. She wanted 'a coat the color of snow-sky, that clear pale blue with silver shimmers hidden in it. . . .'"

God, that line was over-written! Molly Rose cringed and hunched her shoulders because she *hadn't* found the words to describe the color she meant. Odd that Uncle Oscar had remembered the words, but then, Uncle Oscar was a sweetheart.

JayCee was growing impatient, so she read on. "You tell me if I got it right. Love, Uncle Oscar. P.S. This is from our sample run but it should fit you just fine. The coats won't be on the market until *next* year, so you'll be predicting the future, as usual. *More* love."

With considerable help from Mary and JayCee, she opened the inside package and unfolded the tissue paper. "Oh!" she said. Nestled within the tissue paper was a down coat the color of snow-sky. She drew it from the box (JayCee immediately dived into the tissue to dance in noisy joy) and shook it out. The fabric shimmered with silver highlights. "Oh," she said again, and to Mary, she added, "He got the color—he really got the color! Will you just *look!*"

Mary was, truth be told, more interested in the ribbons, and she and

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JayCee held tug-of-war while Molly Rose tried on the coat. The fit was perfect (of course).

When she'd had enough of admiring the snow-sky coat in the mirror over the bathroom sink, she reluctantly hung it away in the closet. As she did, she caught up the cuff of her old coat. Good for maybe two more years, she thought again, and it should fit Mrs. Eleanor. How late did the play run? If she took the coat to the theater with her and left during curtain calls, she might just catch Mrs. Eleanor at her rounds. Her head full of frantic plans and the rustle of tissue paper in her ears, she fell asleep the moment her head touched her pillow.

The cats woke her early, which was just as well. With great joy, they helped her trim the tree. Putting on her new coat, Molly Rose dashed out to the store for a few last-minute goodies. Everybody else in the world had had the same thought, of course, so that took an hour. The supermarket had a small section devoted to pet toys, where she got the cats their traditional Christmas catnip mice . . . and where she paused a long moment and, on impulse, also bought a small dog's chew-bone.

She and the cats sat down to a formal Christmas dinner of roast chicken, after which she pulled the plug on the Christmas tree lights, dressed, and rushed off to the theater, leaving the cats to fling their mice about in wild abandon. She did not forget to shove her old coat into a spare shopping bag.

This she settled under her seat in the theater. She'd made it with time to spare, and as her feet brushed the bag, she wished there were something more she could do for Mrs. Eleanor. After a moment, she had it. She fished in her purse for the pretty little Chinese silk pouch she kept her change in. She took out two tokens, one to get her home, the other to get her to work, and tucked the pouch into an inside pocket of the coat. On second thought, she checked her wallet: two twenties left. She could make one more meal of the stew and dole out the remainder of the chicken to the cats . . . that would last her till she could cash her paycheck. She tucked one of the twenties into the silk pouch and zipped it into her old coat pocket.

Then she settled back and let anticipation have its way with her. Dickens had believed Scrooge could change . . . maybe all those goblinated customers would too.

"Excuse me, ma'am," said a voice. She rose to let the young man ease past and into the seat beyond hers. He was maybe fifteen, dark-skinned, with even darker freckles, and a wild mop of jet-black hair. He settled himself (then re-settled himself, all gawk and long arms and longer legs) and then fixed his bright dark eyes on the stage with such anticipation that Molly Rose smiled at him and said, "Yeah, I can't wait, either."

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"You're Molly Rose, then," he said.

Startled, it took her a minute to get it: this was Elise's friend.

"Elise said, 'Look for the only smile in the place, and that's Molly Rose.' *Thank you.* I *wanted* to see this, but I could never afford . . ."

"Me neither. A customer gave me the tickets because I said I liked Dickens." (And his joy at once made up for the spirit in which they'd been given.)

He nodded enthusiastically, as if to say he liked Dickens quite as much. "Merry Christmas, then," she said, and he smiled a beautiful bashful smile and said, "Merry Christmas," and the house lights went down.

Three lines into the performance, Molly Rose was appalled. This version was not simply bad; it was insulting. Someone (someone who didn't trust his audience) had excised all the "difficult" words and replaced all the unfamiliar phrases with modern phrases, and, in so doing, had lost the beautiful rhythms of sentences that Dickens had worked so hard to achieve. Even with a free ticket, Elise's friend had been purely ripped off. (My-sister-the-bitch probably would have loved it.) Molly Rose's anger at Christmas was back, hotter than ever.

At the end of the first act, as the lights came up, she saw to her amazement that the kid next to her was still glowing. "This is wonderful," he said. "Hey, I didn't introduce myself, I'm sorry. I'm Tim White, and if ever there's anything I can do to thank you—like maybe you need some bookshelves hung or something . . ."

"I'll remember," she said. Not wishing to bring him down with her foul mood, she found a smile somewhere. "And there *is* something you can do for me."

"Name it!"

"Read the original story. You've got to hear him—Charles Dickens, I mean—tell it in his own words." She jerked her thumb in the general direction of the stage. "They won't tell you about the game of Blindman's-buff the way he does, and how Topper goes after the plump sister in the lace tucket." Remembrance made her smile genuine; she met his eyes. "The plump sister's one of my favorites; she's such a joy.—If you've got younger kids in the family, read it aloud to them. That's how it was meant to be heard; *A Christmas Carol* is music."

"O-*kay!*" he said. "I've got two little sisters"—the shy smile turned mischievous—"and one of 'em's plump."

As he followed her to the lobby to stretch those gawky teenage limbs, she realized that she couldn't bear to sit through the second act. She couldn't even hang out with him through the intermission: he'd want to talk about the performance. He loved it and she didn't, and there was no need to ruin the rest of it for him.

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She looked down at the shopping bag in her hands. "I can't stay for the second act," she said, "I've got one last present to deliver and it's now or never."

She'd disappointed him. She couldn't leave him with such saddened eyes. "Hey, I know," she said. "All those folks in standing room?"—she handed him her ticket stub—"Make one of them the Christmas present of a seat." Yeah, his eyes brightened. "Pick a date or a seat-mate, just so long as it's somebody who can share your joy in this."

"O-*kay!*"

Leaving him shining in new anticipation, Molly Rose rushed away. Her smile vanished; it had been only a reflection of his. She tried to cheer herself with the thought that she'd make Mrs. Eleanor's rounds in good time, but that wasn't enough. The fact was, Scrooge wasn't reformed: they hadn't *heard* Dickens. If they couldn't hear *Charles Dickens*, what good could any tale of *hers* do?

She left the coat in the usual alleyway and wandered glumly down the street instead of going home. A bowl of smoking bishop, she thought; better that than sit home and fume all evening. Besides, she'd always wanted to taste smoking bishop. (Perhaps she'd see that lovely lace scarf at the neck of the young man's lovely young woman. . . .)

She turned a corner and found Mrs. Eleanor walking Susie. (Mrs. Eleanor was *early* tonight, or perhaps she made two rounds of the same area, but Molly Rose was very glad circumstance had brought her home in time.) "Mrs. Eleanor," she said. "Good evening to you and Susie."

"Good evening. A lovely Christmas day eve, isn't it? Down, Susie." The little invisible dog was obviously jumping at Molly Rose; Mrs. Eleanor bent down and picked her up.

"A lovely Christmas day," Molly Rose said. "You smell my cats, don't you, Susie? And maybe this as well." She reached into her pocket. "I hope you won't mind, Mrs. Eleanor. But I got a little present for her. . . ."

She found she didn't quite know what to do with the chew-bone, but Mrs. Eleanor had it covered. "Why, thank you," she said, taking the dog-toy. She leaned closer. "If I give it to her now, she'll be too excited to mind. I'll see she gets it the moment we get home."

"Thanks, and Merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas to you, too." Mrs. Eleanor put the dog down, where Susie bounded enthusiastically about her ankles, wrapping her in the leash. "Susie says Merry Christmas to the cats, too."

She went her way and Molly Rose went hers. The gallery-loft was only ten blocks away, and, warm in Uncle Oscar's snow-sky coat, if not in heart, Molly Rose walked. Better that than run the subway gauntlet of the goblinated a second time this evening.

The gallery-loft was chilly but welcoming, and so were the art works.

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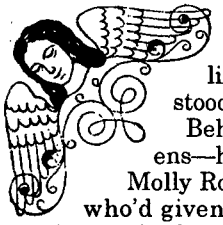

Christmas ghosts, all—running the gamut from the jaunty and cheerful to the truly nightmarish. She liked one Ghost of Christmas Present enormously, and stood before it to let it warm her.

Behind her, a young man said, "Too much. I *loathe* Dickens—he's so manipulative, always wringing your heart."

Molly Rose swung on him. He was the very nice young man who'd given her the invitation, but she was suddenly furious. Loathe Dickens? How—? All too sharply, she said, "Do you *write*?"

He looked at her, even seemed to recognize her, then shook his head. "No, why do you ask?"

"You think Dickens was dishonest—that's what you're actually saying." Hands on hips, she glared at him and spoke from all the banked heat of her anger. "I *don't*. *I* write and I think Dickens got just as manipulated by his characters as his readers do. I think they wrung his heart, and I think he wouldn't have spent the ink on them if he hadn't cared for each and every one as much as he wants *you* to."

The young man drew back as if she'd struck him, and Molly Rose stood aghast at her own goblination. She tried to form an apology, but before she could get it out, someone yelled, "Mintern—give us a hand with the punch bowl, will you?"

"'Xcuse me," he said—and fled.

Now that he was gone she saw him in her mind's eye, and now she saw that he'd dressed for Dickens's period, in a frock coat and stiff collar. At his throat, he'd worn that lovely white lace scarf, loosely bowed. Dressed like one of old Fezziwig's lively young 'prentices for the Christmas party.

His invitation yesterday *had* been his shy version of a pass. Today, he'd tried to strike up a conversation, and she . . . tomorrow, Molly Rose was never going to forgive herself.

Feeling like my-sister-the-bitch, Molly Rose edged from the room, looking for a place to hide, the deeper and darker the better. She didn't look where she was going, only for shadows, and she found a library. (A library much like her own: a long narrow hallway made narrower by being lined on either side with bookshelves.) The books were beautiful and lovingly read, and Molly Rose couldn't help but read the titles, to see what sort of lover they had. Not the young man she just yelled at (he wouldn't have called it yelling, but Molly Rose considered it such and hunched her shoulders again), for there was a full collection of Dickens. Her hand went out to touch the spine of the well-worn copy of *A Christmas Carol*.

"May I offer you a cup of smoking bishop?"

The voice, so close, startled her hand away from the shelves. At her elbow stood a young man with flyaway sideburns and long wavy hair brushed and cut as if to keep his ears warm. Like the young man with

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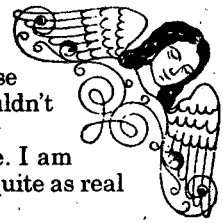

the lace scarf, he too was dressed in frock coat and stiffened collar, a soft bow at his throat.

"Oh. Thank you." She took the cup, and with it a close look at the fellow. His face was familiar; his name wouldn't come to mind.

"Thank you, my dear, for your passionate defense. I am much obliged." He made a slight bow. "Tiny Tim was quite as real to me as you are."

"Oh," she said, recognizing him then. What a lovely idea to have a re-enactor present at the festivities! She'd once spoken to "Mark Twain" and still remembered him with delight. "Mr. Dickens," she said. "Forgive me for not recognizing you from the first. I admire your work, sir." She held up the cup in offer. "May I drink to your continued good health?"

"And I yours," he said, clinking his cup to hers. They drank, and the smoking bishop went down warm and soothing. Molly Rose held the cup in both hands, letting more warmth seep into her, and smiled. "I always wanted to taste a smoking bishop, because of Ebenezer Scrooge and Bob Cratchit. I never dreamed I'd have the honor of having that taste with the fellow who introduced me to them. I wish I were half the writer you are."

"You must only *believe*," he said.

Something cracked inside Molly Rose. "That's just it. I don't, not this year, and I can't lie about it."

He replenished her cup from the steaming cut-glass bowl at his elbow. "Please," he said. "Be seated and tell me why you don't believe."

The cup burned her tongue and the spices stung her eyes, and Molly Rose sat down and told him everything. All about the goblinated people who, being tired themselves, slapped tireder children, about the fearful people who bullied and threatened, about the hatred she saw around her in the world that seemed all the stronger for its being Christmas.

Finally, she told him about the butchered production of his tale she'd seen earlier that evening, which seemed to sum up everything that was wrong with Christmas these days. "It's as if the world has taken Scrooge—the *unreformed* Scrooge—as the genius of the age. This age doesn't *deserve* your carol," she finished bitterly.

She stared into her cup, having found it grown cold. When she finally raised her eyes to meet his, she found them cold and hollow and so deep the hair at the nape of her neck rose in fear.

From his writing desk, he gathered up a sheaf of papers. Stacking them (the way she always stacked her manuscript pages: absently, out of habit), he held them toward the fire. "Shall I take it from them, then? I've only to throw this in the fire, and the odious Ebenezer Scrooge will never have been."

The fire leapt high, as if in anticipation.

"No!" said Molly Rose. She rose to her feet. "Oh, no, you mustn't!" In

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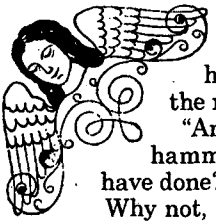

her sudden terror, she snatched the manuscript from his hands. (Though, truth be told, he gave it into her hands.) Hugging it to her, she sat down, well away from the roaring of the fire. "You mustn't," she said again.

"And why not? If, as you say, the story was not the sledgehammer against poverty I intended, why not burn it and have done?"

Why not, indeed? thought Molly Rose. What use was a story if your readers didn't hear what you said to them? "Because" —she faltered, trying to put it into words— "because the world would be so much poorer without the hope that Ebenezer Scrooge might reform, the hope that Tiny Tim might live because of something we might do if only we understood what Christmas meant. Because you mustn't take that hope from us. Without hope, people won't *try*."

She riffled the papers, squinting to decipher his scrawled words, looking for that last lovely hope in the unfamiliar sprawl of ink, amid his crammed-in corrections and coiling deletions.

It wasn't there! Disbelieving, she fought her way through his handwriting a second time. Then she stared at him through the smoky light of the oil lamp in shock. "You didn't write it," she said. Her voice sounded dead to her; as dead as Dickens.

"Didn't write what?" He came to the settle and leaned over her shoulder.

"Here, at the very last minute, it should say—" Her fingertip on the next to last paragraph, tears welling as they always did, Molly Rose recited the missing line from memory: "'And to Tiny Tim, who did NOT die, he was a second father.'"

He bent over her. As his finger traced the paragraph, he laughed and shook his head in wonder. "Why, bless my soul!" he cried. "And bless you, my dear. I've rehearsed the words so many times in my imagination and before my glass that I thought I had written them down." He laughed again. "Never fear, I've ample time to correct the omission before the book goes to print."

"You will go to print then." She held the manuscript fiercely, protectively.

"I will," he said. "I promise."

"And Tiny Tim will live?"

He smiled at her fondly. "Could I do less for him than Ebenezer?"

Thus reassured, she allowed him to take back the manuscript. He laid it on his writing desk and offered her another cup of smoking bishop.

She took it gladly, still shivering from the cold draft that blew through her heart. "Perhaps," she said, "perhaps the world *did* listen, *does* listen. Someone somewhere read your carol and took it to heart. . . ."

"Oh," he said, "I know that for fact. Had not Ebenezer Scrooge reformed, Mrs. Eleanor would have died of the cold tonight. I have some small evidence of my success—as do you of yours. . . ."

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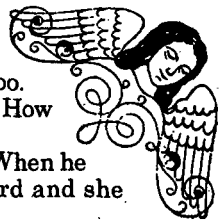

She raised her eyes to him quizzically.

"You have a coat the color of snow-sky." She did indeed; Uncle Oscar had heard her. Maybe others had too.

Suddenly startled, she rose from the settle. "How—" How did you know, she had meant to say.

But he had taken her hand, raised it, and kissed it. When he straightened, he once again caught her in his regard and she could not speak.

"I beg of you, don't be too hard on the young man," he said. "I did, albeit innocently, complicate his childhood." He patted her hand. "You have lightened my day, my dear. It's rare to meet a colleague of such similar philosophy."

Then, just for a moment, his eyes turned deep again. This time, they did not chill her. He leaned closer and whispered, "If ever a dog were wild with joy, it's Susie with her chew-bone. If ever Mrs. Eleanor were wild with warmth and joy—why, it's this very Christmas day!"

He smiled at her wordlessness. "I'm glad you like the plump sister; so do I." He winked and added, "And now I'll leave the two of you alone."

Someone jostled Molly Rose, spilling hot wine steaming onto the floor. She jumped and turned, and, when she looked back, Charles Dickens was gone. In his place was the young man who loathed Dickens, the young man in the lovely lace scarf. . . .

"Thank heaven you're still here," he said. "I wanted to apologize for my earlier behavior. I really put my foot in it. . . ."

Molly Rose shook her head to clear it. The study was gone; so was the fireplace. Once again, she stood in a narrow book-lined hallway, one hand clasped about a cup of bishop and the fingertips of the other poised atop a copy of *A Christmas Carol* on the shelves.

She'd zoned out . . . lack of sleep often brought her flashes of vivid daydreams. Usually, though, the flashes were bits of whatever story she was working on at the time.

There was no Dickens re-enactor, let alone the ghost of Charles Dickens himself; there was only her overwrought imagination. "An undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard," she thought. (That was Scrooge's explanation for Marley's ghost.)

"—The smoking bishop," she added, aloud. (That was hers.) "What on earth went into it? That's much stronger than I expected." She set the cup atop a hissing radiator.

"No such excuse for me, I'm afraid," he said. "I've been tasting it all week while we adjusted the recipe." He held out his hand. "My name's Eben Mintern."

"Molly Rose," she said. His hand enclosed hers, warm and tingling. "I'm sorry. I'm so exhausted I'm acting like my-sister-the-bitch." The book tipped from the shelf into her other hand. "I'd better go home before I fall over."

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He nodded and released her hand. Not meeting her eyes, he looked instead at the book she was holding. "Do you know, I've never actually *read* that? I've always assumed from the films . . ." He shook his head ruefully. "I can be such an ass sometimes. I *am* sorry. If I promise to give Dickens himself a try, may I walk you to the bus or the subway or wherever it is you're going?"

"I'm going ten blocks to my apartment and it's *cold* out there," she said with a smile.

"The offer still goes. *And* the promise."

"I'd like that, Evan."

"Eben," he corrected, still not meeting her eyes. "E. B as in 'braindead.' E. N." He spelled his last name as well, and the change in manner between the spelling of the first and the spelling of the last required Molly Rose's full attention.

"Eben," she said, at last, "Would that be your full first name or. . . ?" When he tinged with color, she knew all too well how Dickens had complicated his childhood. "Ah," she said softly, "your grudge against Charles Dickens is *personal*. All I can say in our defense is: we've got to call our characters *something*."

He laughed, then, and shook his head. "In Dickens' defense, he was hardly to blame for my mom's taste in names."

Very shyly, Molly Rose said, "I love your mom's taste in names. 'Ebenezer' is full of hope and generosity and old Fezziwig's Christmas party and—'to Tiny Tim, who did NOT die, he was a second father.' It suits you, right down to the white lace scarf."

"Then *you*," he said, in all solemnity, "may call me Ebenezer." Again, he smiled, and Molly couldn't have been more warmed beside a roaring fire. She knew for certain that no one else had ever been granted the privilege.

"I'll get your coat," he said. When he had (and when he had admired the color and she'd thanked him on Uncle Oscar's behalf), she took his arm and they stepped into the cold.

A light snow was falling, and the city air swirled with the reflected colors of Christmas lights. As cold as the night was, Molly Rose felt warmer than she had for days, and she paused on the steps to watch the play of snow.

When she remembered at last that she was not alone, she found Eben gazing down at her. His (very beautiful) eyes held that same dreamy look she remembered from their first meeting. "Forgive me," he said. "I was sketching you in my head, the way you watched the snow."

Embarrassed (but pleased), she went down the steps watching her feet.

"Josie," he said, in a change-the-subject tone, "asked me to ask you your friend's real name. She'd like to thank him; he really made the evening."

"My friend?"

"That Charles Dickens guy. He was really very good, she says, and

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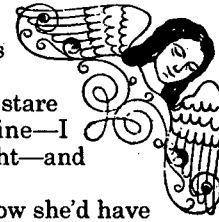

Josie should know: she's a Dickens fan to end all Dickens fans. That's why she chose Christmas Spirits as a subject for the show."

Molly Rose stopped in her tracks and drew away to stare at him. The wind was chillier now. "He wasn't mine—I mean, I didn't bring him." (Then who did? she thought—and the study, and the *fireplace?*)

Molly Rose played fair when she wrote (or that's how she'd have put it); she wouldn't ask a reader to believe a thing she couldn't. The ghost of Charles Dickens? Was he asking her to beli—

("You must only *believe,*" Charles Dickens had told her.)

"I thought I'd imagined him."

Eben held up one hand, Boy Scout fashion, and said, "No, you didn't: he was there, and he knew you. He must have, from the way he spoke." A flush spread across his face, or perhaps the coloring was only reflected light. "He said your name was Molly Rose Hawkins, and you were angry at Christmas, and, if I knew what was in my own best interest, I'd offer to see you home like a proper gentleman."

And if Molly Rose couldn't believe in the ghost of Charles Dickens, she *could* believe in Ebenezer—

She couldn't help but laugh. (If she had seen a ghost on Christmas Day, what better ghost to see?) "In those words?" she asked.

"Well, no, but I've never been good at remembering exact words—pictures, yes, words no. I'm sure of the 'angry at Christmas' though; I could sketch it for you. In fact, I *will* sketch it for you. *Are* you angry at Christmas?"

"No, not quite that. I was angry that I couldn't make people *feel* Christmas the way he could make me feel Christmas."

"He said I might doubt his sincerity all I liked, but if I read your stories, I'd never doubt yours. He said you believed and you wrote from the heart." Eben smiled again and added, "He said if I happened to need a Christmas inspiration of my own, I'd best apply to you."

They'd almost walked past her corner. Molly Rose pointed and led the way to her steps.

"He was right about that: I'd like to sketch the way you watched the snow. I'd like—may I have your number? And did he give me your real name? I faithfully promise I'll read *A Christmas Carol* before I call . . . and something of yours, as well." He brought out a sketch pad and pencil and held them out to her.

"Come in," she said, "and warm yourself by a roaring radiator."

As she fumbled the key into the lock, he bent and said, "What's this?" As they stepped into the shelter of the lobby, he held out a package. "Here, it's addressed to you."

The package was wrapped in pink foil that had been used once be-

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fore. Affixed to it was Mrs. Eleanor's Christmas ribbon, and Molly Rose's name was written in a large, awkward hand.

Wildly curious, Molly Rose opened the package, taking care not to dislodge the ribbon or the printing. Inside she found a worn copy of *A Christmas Carol* and a note.

"Miss Hawkins," read the note (part of a brown paper bag, the edges neatly torn), in the same hand. "This has been in my family for many generations. I thought you would treasure it as I have. Susie loved her present. Merry Christmas from the two of us." The note was signed, "(Mrs.) Eleanor Roosevelt."

"Eleanor Roosevelt?" said Eben.

"Mrs. Eleanor is a friend of mine. I met her one night when she was walking her dog, Susie."

"There's more to the story than that," Eben said. "I can see it in your face. Eleanor Roosevelt? In the family for generations? That edition was remaindered all over the stores just this year. I know; I bought one for the Rackham illustrations." He suddenly threw up his hands, as if in surrender. "I'll *read* it!"

Molly Rose cocked her head at Eben. "Come up. You can meet Mary and JayCee and I'll tell you the story and maybe you'll understand."

Together they sat in the warmth of her kitchen and ate leftover stew. JayCee curled herself in Eben's lap, Mary in Molly Rose's, and Molly Rose told him all about Mrs. Eleanor. As she did, she cradled Mrs. Eleanor's gift. The book had been read almost to tatters and the weight was cozy in her hands.

As she finished telling Eben about Mrs. Eleanor, she let the book fall to a natural opening. Mary purred and stretched a paw and claws onto the page, as if to snag her favorite line:

"The curtains of his bed were drawn aside; and Scrooge, starting up into a half-recumbent attitude, found himself face to face with the unearthly visitor who drew them: as close to it as I am now to you, *and I am standing in the spirit at your elbow.*"

The phrase had been twice underscored—rough, uneven underscoring born of cold ink and worn nib.

Scratched in the margin, by the same pen and in the same sprawled hand she'd earlier struggled to decipher in the pages of his manuscript, were the words: "And so I am.—Boz."

Eben rose, setting JayCee carefully back in the warm spot he'd left in the chair. "Now I've got to read that book," he said. "He caught you up; he made you stop to reread a passage." He put on his jacket. "May I call you tomorrow?"

Still caught in the book's pages, Molly Rose nodded. "Please do," she said. "I'd like that very much."

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"If I see Mrs. Eleanor, I'll say hello. I'll know her when I see her now, even if I can't see Susie the way you can. He was right about you, you know."

"He?" She paused, with her hand on the door.

"Charles Dickens," Eben said. "Whoever he was."

"Boz," she said, glancing at the little book in her hand. "Tell your friend Josie he went by the name of Boz when he wrote this."

Eben got the reference; his smile was brilliant. "Yes," he said, "oh, yes! Josie will love that." He touched her cheek, lightly, with the very tips of his fingers. "So do I. That would be something to tell the children, wouldn't it?" His voice and eyes were full of mischief.

"—What?"

"Why, that on a certain Christmas Day, many years ago, the ghost of Charles Dickens introduced an Ebenezer to their mother. . . ." He kissed her startled mouth, then, quickly, warmly. "Merry Christmas."

He bolted. Halfway down the flight of stairs, he added, "—and I'll call you tomorrow."

Laughing, Molly Rose closed the door and leaned against it. (Her lips still tingled. That would be something to tell the children—how like Boz to toss love and laughter into the midst of her anger!) Her finger still marked the passage he'd underlined. Once again, she opened the book and reread his message. Ebenezer's kiss was still on her lips, and Dickens's voice was warm and clear and strong in her ear.

"All right, Boz," she said. She sat once more at the kitchen table. "I'll write my Christmas story. If we've got to reform Ebenezer Scrooge every damn year, we might as well get to it. Between the two of us, maybe we can get it to take." Laying aside the book, she drew paper to her and picked up her pen.

With Mary in her lap, JayCee draped across her toes, and Charles Dickens standing in the spirit at her elbow, she began to put her hope to paper. ●

—for David and Susan Ashmore. They know why.

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why goldfish shouldn't use power tools

first, they would probably be
electrocuted, as it is dangerous
to mix water and electricity.
but what about battery power
you ask, *for example a cordless drill*
with modified trigger,
sensitive enough to respond
to a filmy pectoral fin,
so that even an angel fish
could activate the bit?
I mean—you say—*what about Navy S.E.A.L.s?*
don't they use power tools underwater?
couldn't those be modified?
well, yes, technically it could be done,
but think about it: your goldfish
swimming around in their bowl
atop your Louis whatever pedestal table
and an antique doily handed down from
great-aunt beatrice—who could have given you
a million dollars but no it was the doily instead—
those goldfish with a dazed expression
and vacant eyes and no cerebral cortex to speak of?
do you really want to give them
that kind of power? those kinds of tools?
think about it.
think about water damage
and how foolish you'd feel
filling out the insurance claim,
admitting that the bowl broke
because you empowered your goldfish,
gave them power tools and power over their destiny.
and how would you know

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if one of your goldfish had a death wish?
it could be murder/suicide
and you would be an accessory.
but what about goldfish rights? you say
what about the artistic possibilities.
the fine engraving they might do
on the inside of the bowl.
which i could then sell for a million dollars
—take that aunt beatrice—and what if
they're yearning for expression?
okay, fine, expression is good,
but steer them in other directions.
how about performance art?
turn a video camera on the bowl
and give them the opportunity
to reveal their souls that way.
you can always tape over
the boring parts;
goldfish don't seem to understand
dramatic structure.
Or power tools—
or the projected angst you are misdirecting.
you want a power tool? get one
for yourself.
buy the goldfish a plastic castle
and a bag of colored marbles,
or maybe one of those bubbly skeleton things
that goes up and down.
you want to give them
more than they need.
your own curved reflection
stares back at you
from inside the bowl.

—Laurel Winter

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Rob Chilson

DO WE DARE DISTURB THE UNIVERSE?

Though Rob Chilson is often identified as a writer of "hard" science fiction, his latest book is a humorous horror novel, *Black as Blood,* set in his native, west-central Missouri. Beginning in July of this year, it was serialized in *tomorrowsf* (the online magazine), and it will soon be published in paperback by Baen Books.

The man paused in the dusk of what would be a moonless night, looking tensely back down the long valley he had been ascending. The pale ribbon of the untraveled road wound through the dense forest, diminishing in distance. Though it was clear, the light had the watery look of air just before a great storm, and the spring green of the leaves and grass was drained of color where by day it had shouted. It was the quietest time of evening, when the day birds are silent and the night birds not yet abroad. The breeze had died and not a leaf stirred. Looking down the valley was like tossing a stone into a muffled well; not an echo came back.

He heard nothing.

When one concentrates in stillness, one can hear a faint roaring in one's ears, the sound of blood rushing through them. The man heard this noise now. It seemed to grow louder and louder, then vanished as an insect stridulated, returned, vanished again as a night bird gave its sharp, peremptory cry: nighthawk, he identified automatically. Something fluttered past him with soft-edged sound: whippoorwill, almost as silent as an owl.

Normal night noises. He heard nothing else. Did he hear anything else? No, he heard nothing else.

Looking up, he saw the first star. It winked at him, but that was quite normal also. He looked around. Beside the overgrown cart track that was the only road through the valley was a great gnarled oak with a white stripe up one side where fire had scored it in years past and the bark had fallen away. A distinctive landmark even in the dusk—too obvious. He moved a few rods farther up the track, silently as a cat, then deliberately stepped into the forest.

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He thought it best to go some little distance from the road, and not less than two stone's throws separated him from it when at last he crouched beneath a hazel bush dense as a haystack. It was no night for a fire, nor was he sleepy. He sat hunched up, arms on knees, slowly relaxing, his razor-edged alertness gradually leaving him.

The night became noisy with the cries of whippoorwills, owls, and other birds; somewhere a fox barked harshly. No sound came from the track through the valley. It was so utterly dark now, here under the trees and the hazel, that he saw nothing but imaginary pinpricks of light in his eyes. No cave could be darker.

Here he waited, for sleep or death.

Dawn awoke him, somewhat to his surprise, and he rose slowly, partly from caution, partly from stiffness. He issued carefully from the forest, studying the road and listening intently for sounds beyond those of the morning birds and insects. None. None but normal sounds. At length he came out onto the road and continued on his way.

A mile stretched the kinks from his limbs, and a sandwich of bread and cheese from his jacket pocket eased his hunger, while a stream that crossed the road quenched his thirst. His weariness nothing could allay.

Motion alarmed him, off the road, and he paused. He saw a skinny, unkempt boy with a fishing pole. His ragged jeans were wet to the knee by the still-thick dew. With his pole, shy appearance, rags, and unruly tow hair, he was almost the cartoon of a country boy. The man did not smile, however, noting the dark bruise on one cheek, the starved-gaunt cheekbones, the frightened, hungry eyes.

"Howdy," he said.

The boy nodded, squeaked a scared, "Hi," and cleared his throat.

"Up early," the man said easily. "Fish wake up early, too."

"Yeah," said the boy. His voice was under better control now. He came down a narrow path and stepped onto the road. "Where you goin' to?" he asked.

He couldn't have seen many strangers, the man reflected, despite the ease of modern travel. He nodded toward the upper end of the valley. "Across the gap there, down the other side, to the river."

The boy looked contemplatively up toward the old, mellow mountains rising here and there above the treeline. "Not many goes that way. Road ends up-a-ways. At Fishers'. Hafta follow the old log road."

"Does it cross the gap?"

"No, it only goes to the top. Top of the gap's all in second-growth. They logged it all off, 'fore I was borned."

"But a man can get down the other side?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Prob'ly not a horse—I never been up there, but I heard tell it's steep. There ain't no road nor nothin'. Not even a trail."

The man looked sharply aside. Already the morning breezes were be-

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ginning, and it was as if Something had picked up a shabby old leaf, turned it over, laid it back down. He started to speak, then a double handful of ragged leaves and odd bits of vegetable trash were picked up, *tossed* into the air. But then the breeze released them, ruffled the weeds alongside the road, and cooled the man's sweating face.

The boy looked puzzled. He had seen nothing alarming or unusual, and neither, the man thought, had he.

He stood looking for a long moment down the valley, mostly to recover himself: saw nothing, heard nothing. He looked back at the boy. "You mentioned a family—the Fishers. Could a man buy food there?"

The boy blinked. "Why, I expect they'd give you food, was you to ask. 'Spect they'd be pleased to take your money." He hesitated. "Want me to come along and show you the way to the gap?"

The yearning look was strong in his eyes, and the man hesitated.

"Won't your parents miss you? It's quite a piece. You'd not be back before night."

"Oh, Ma and Pa won't miss me none till dark. I done my chores 'fore I left this morning. They don't care about me, anyways," he added. He seemed unaware of the sadness of his tone.

Still the man hesitated. "You can come along to the Fishers', anyway. Be a pleasure to have your company."

With a look of gratitude as well as pleasure the boy fell into stride with him. "Thanks for lettin' me come with you, mister. Most folks don't like for me to be around."

"Can't say as I ever had any great number of people who wanted me around, either," the man said.

"How come, mister?"

"If you're different, you upset folks."

"I guess I'm diff'rent, too," the boy said ruefully. "I know I upset folks. But I don't know what to do about it."

"I never found anything I could do," the man said. "I never minded it as much as I guess you do. Being alone, I mean. Truth is, other folks upset me, too. They were different from me, and it works both ways."

"Oh." For a long time the boy was silent, marching along the winding, dusty road in the cool of the morning. At length he looked up at the man. "But you don't mind havin' me around?"

"Not at all. Like I said, it's a pleasure."

"Well, it's mighty nice of you, mister," said the boy shyly. "'Cause I sure like being with you."

They tramped on in companionable silence for some time, occasionally stopping while the man scanned their rear for signs of pursuit. At these times the boy also looked and listened intently. He was visibly curious whenever the man stopped and stared tensely, as he often did, at normal things: a bush, a butterfly, a distant cloud. He asked no questions, however.

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At length they found themselves on a hill overlooking the Fisher farm. The man paused here and studied the farm for some time, but men and women went about their business in a normal fashion, to and from the barn. It was early yet, but the dew was going and the cows had been milked and turned out.

When they descended the hill and approached the farmhouse, they found no threat. The man was welcomed cordially, the boy less so. The latter received frowns, in fact, but no one objected to his presence. The man was questioned eagerly about his pursuits, and responded easily with a tale of being on a walking tour. He explained his intention of crossing over the gap above the farm.

"That'll take me down to Millersburg, accordin' to the map," said the man.

"Guess it will," said the elder Fisher. "Only Grampaw Fisher ever crossed it, that I know of, and he ain't here t' tell you about it. Over to Simpsons', that's my sister, his other grandchile. Ain't no reason to cross the gap, 'cept for fun, like him and you, Mister."

"Pity you folks don't have time for more fun. But I guess you 'druther go to town for your fun while us townies like to get out into the sticks for ours."

They all laughed. "Yeah, I guess that's about the size of it."

The wife handed him a one-pound blue lard tin with the white picture of a hog on it. It was packed full of food, and he had trouble getting them to accept money.

"The boy goin' with you?" Fisher asked abruptly.

"Yeah, he's showin' me the old log road. That'll save me a lot of blunderin' around."

"He belongs to home. Down to the Raeburns'."

"He's a big boy, he'll be able to find his way back. Well, thanks again, you folks. Take care."

"Goodbye, goodbye!" They waved, the children following him as far as the road to continue waving. None had spoken to the boy.

They walked most of a mile after the goodbyes had ended, the boy silent, seeming preoccupied. From time to time he looked up earnestly at the man. Presently, when the man had again studied his back trail for signs of pursuit, he spoke.

"You gonna make me go back?"

The man looked down. "You want to go back to the Raeburns'?"

The boy looked puzzled. "It's my home. But," fearfully, "I'd rather be with you."

The man was slow in responding. After a dozen strides he said, "Was it your Ma or your Pa who gave you that bruise?"

At first the boy didn't seem to know what he meant, till the man touched it. He jerked away, then stopped himself. "That was my Pa."

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"Your Ma treat you that way too?"

"Well, she don't hit me as much. Mostly she just says things."

"Why do they treat you that way?"

"Well, Ma's not really my Ma. She married my Pa—my real father, after my real mother died. Only my real father is maybe not my father, 'cause I was borned out of wedlock." He said these things as a boy might say, *You can see I'm ugly,* sadly but acceptingly. "And then my real father died, and Ma married Pa."

"Stepmother and stepfather both," the man said. "Do they have kids?"

"Yeah," the boy said shortly.

The man nodded, then sighed. "Well, I would be pleased to have you come with me, across the gap, down to Millersburg, and on. Only I can't."

The boy looked soberly up at him. "On account of who's follerin' you?"

"Yes. The truth is, I don't expect to make it across the gap. It was close behind me, but I struck out on foot, and managed to baffle it for a while. But it won't be baffled long."

"It's not a person—not people?"

"No." For a time they walked, the boy looking up inquiringly, while the man revolved explanations. Finally he said, "There's a poem that says, 'Do I dare/Disturb the universe?' Well, I dared, and you could say the universe doesn't like to be disturbed. There's something after me, something nobody can fight. I'm up here," he added, "to make sure it doesn't hurt anybody but me. I'm looking for a place a long way away from other people, to wait for it."

The boy considered that. "You said you don't really like people."

"Not exactly. I just don't get along. And even people I don't like, I respect. I *approve* of people, you know. I think people are a good idea."

"I never thought of that," the boy said wonderingly. He was silent for a long time. "I have to go back?"

"When you've shown me the log road, you probably better start back. It's for your own safety."

After another pause, the boy said, "I'd rather be with you. Even when it comes." He looked up beseechingly.

"You might die."

"I don't care."

The man stopped. "Look here. I do care. I don't want you to be hurt." The boy visibly fought with tears, and he sighed. "Sending you back would hurt you worse than dying, wouldn't it?"

The boy nodded, gulped, nodded again.

"I suppose so." He sighed. "Come on, we can't talk here—I want to get farther from the Fishers'."

They tramped on for a ways, the boy leading now. Presently he looked up, gestured left.

"We turn off here and go over this little ridge. That's the short route to

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the old log road. From there you cain't go wrong. It'll take you up to the gap. They say the gap's like a little valley floor, only arrowhead shape. You just keep on toward the back, where it looks like the mountains come together, and you'll come to the point, just between them. Then you scramble down."

"Lead the way," the man said.

Eagerly the boy did so, and shortly they came across a track so overgrown the man at first did not recognize it.

"Here it is," said the boy. He gestured toward the notch where the mountains drew together. "Take you right up. This is as far's I ever been, though."

The man was looking back down the valley, his whole body tense.

"Mister?"

"Take the bucket," he said. He thrust the blue pail at the boy, still looking down the valley.

"It's comin'?" the boy asked in a scared whisper, clutching the wire bail. His eyes were dark blue in a pale face.

The man was staring at a tree they'd passed, so far back it was about the size of a man's head at arm's length. It *was* a man's head, and it had the face of the man. It looked at them without any expression at all, and then the morning breeze touched it and its leaves moved all over its face, and it was just a tree again.

The boy gasped sharply, his face the color of cream.

"Mister! Did you see it?" After a moment, hushed, "Did *I* see it?"

"Yes. Look, you go on." The man took an envelope and a pen out of his shirt pocket. "Down to Millersburg. From there you can make it to Cambridge—I'll give you money. See the address on the envelope? Go there. I'll write a letter to a friend—I do have a few. This one worked with me—he knows a little about what I was doing, and he'll want to know what happened to me." He looked earnestly at the pale face. Freckles and the bruise stood out on it. "You must tell him everything. Especially, tell him how far I got."

The boy looked at the tree, looked sharply at a jay shrieking *thief, thief,* looked back at him beseechingly. He swallowed. "I'd rather stay," and his voice was high-pitched, on the verge of tears.

"No, I want you to do this for me."

"I don't understand!" the boy said, almost a wail. "What wuz it you done?"

The man took his arm urgently, but gently. "We haven't much time. What did I do? I was born. Isn't that enough? Look, son, you have to understand that this happens all the time. We have always been disturbers of the universe, we humans. And there are rules for it—we do it that much. The rules say that you must go and I must stay. I must die, but you must live."

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"What kind of a rule is that?" the boy cried, his voice cracking in grief.

"It's in an old book: And ye shall tell it to your children. When you're older, son, you'll understand."

The tears were flowing, but the earnest gaze of the boy had not wavered. "But what did you *do?* What're they gonna do to you?"

The man hesitated. "You could say I took the place of a cat in an experiment. I showed that Bell's inequality is violated for macroscopic events, at sublight speeds—I found that 'reality' is a convention, and broke it. The test results showed me nonexistent at this end of the branch. *They* aren't after me, exactly. It's more like I don't belong here, I shouldn't exist. I'm not in the *book*. I can't say what'll happen when the universe balances. Nobody should be near me when it happens, it's not safe. You understand?"

Clearly he did not, but he said, "I seen the tree. I'm not afraid. I have to go?"

"Yes, you must. I'll go back down the valley—it'll find me well away from the Fishers'. You take out up the mountain—you should be safe if you keep moving. Got it?"

Still the boy hesitated, though he had rubbed the tears away with a grimy fist. "Are you really my father? My real father?"

The man hesitated. "I called you son. Yes, I'm your father. From now on, I'm your father. That's why you have to go on, to live, to carry the word. Will you do your part?"

"Y-yes, mister—P-Pa."

For the first time, the man smiled. He gripped the boy's arms tightly. Then he turned abruptly, with a glance around, to write a hasty note on the back of a piece of paper covered with odd markings.

"That's it, go to the address on the envelope. The man you should show it to will be there—Dr. Harkamon. And here, money, enough to get you there. Tell Dr. Harkamon everything."

"How far you got," the boy said, looking up earnestly. He hesitated. "How far did you git?"

The man looked away, looked back firmly. "Farther, after meeting you, than I got in my whole life before. How far you get depends on how you travel, and with whom, more than on which way you go."

The boy nodded, wiping his eyes, uncomprehending but trusting.

"Dr. Harkamon will take care of you. Tuck the envelope in your pocket, don't lose it. All set? You'd better be going, then—son."

"Y-yes, Pa. Father. Goodbye, Father."

The boy stepped back bravely and lifted his hand in a gesture that was more a salute than a wave. The man responded with a similar salute, then wheeled at the expression on the boy's face and looked behind him. It was a moment before he saw it against the sky: a column of smoke from some isolated farmhouse. It still resembled a pouncing cat with slit-

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ted eyes, though dissolving fast in an unfelt breeze. It was facing toward him.

Abruptly the morning breeze reached them, brushed the tops of all the trees, made everything move. He heard it call his name, saw the trees winking at him.

"Go!" he said, leaping away from the boy even as he gave a final wave.

"I'll tell 'em everything!" the boy shouted. He started quickly up the old road, crashing through old leaves and dry twigs. "How far you got—"

The man smiled a second time, hurrying toward It, not looking back.

Of course the boy did not go far. As soon as his first wind was gone he leaped for a limb and swarmed up a large second-growth maple whose limbs went every which way. He peered back over the tops of most of the growth, saw the man's bare gray head as he walked firmly back down the valley—seen only in fitful glimpses between leaves.

He saw—was it another man? Yes—wearing the same color jacket as his father—same shade of gray hair. But as he looked the scene went dark. He looked up, but no cloud was in the sky, and above, the day was as sunnily bright as ever. When he looked back, it was as if into shaded fog.

That was all.

The darkness lifted, not quickly, but not slowly. Then all was as before. For a long time he bestrode his limb, staring. But trees and clouds all wore their normal aspects. Birds and insects took no notice of anything human, even death. Cautiously, he descended and picked his way, his heart thumping painfully, back to the place where he'd last seen his father.

There was no body. And no place where a body had been dragged away. Nothing but a disturbed pattern in the leaves, as if they'd been sucked up a whirlwind—he'd seen no whirlwind.

Defeated, he stood slumped against a rotting stump, sniffling and occasionally wiping away his tears. Finally he sighed and looked up at the notch. In his hand was a bucket full of food, before him a route out of the valley, and in his pocket a map that would take him to a new life. But how could he bring himself to leave this spot? Could he be sure his father was gone?

Then he saw the cloud.

It looked down at him with His face, calm, serene. And the boy knew that the man would disturb the universe no more. Yet he had passed his life on.

Was he vanquished, or victor? ●

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B.J. Thrower

NOODLE YOU, NOODLE ME

B.J. Thrower, who has lived in Oklahoma almost all of her life, now resides in Tulsa with her husband and two daughters, and works as a circulation/media services assistant at the University of Tulsa Law Library. Influences for "Noodle You, Noodle Me" come from her state, where she is surrounded by a rich Native American culture and heritage, and from her own joy of fishing. While this is her first tale for *Asimov's*, Ms. Thrower's publications include stories in *Non-Stop Magazine*, *Aboriginal SF*, and *Terminal Fright*.

Illustration by Shirley Chan

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The man sat cross-legged and stiff-shouldered without a shirt before the orange flames of his campfire. It was deep night in the wind-whispering pine forest. He had been fasting for three days and he was wobbly, dreamy, disoriented. He had painted his face white, lips black, with horizontal red slashes on his cheeks and forehead. He had greased his long black hair with deer fat and stank to high heaven, but since he was alone he didn't care.

A coyote called on the rim of his consciousness; or maybe it was only a farm dog. He chanted in Lakotah, a Sioux dialect, though his Sioux blood was diluted by drops of Cherokee ancestry. He shook an ancient gourd rattle persistently, twice north, twice east, twice south, twice west. It hissed hypnotically *shoo-shoo, shoo-shoo, shoo-shoo, shoo-shoo.* Steady ritual, once again, twice north . . .

He attained enlightenment; he became *wahupa.* He set the rattle aside. From a crinkled deerskin pouch he brought forth an oval-shaped stone as big as his fist. He held it tightly in his clenched hand, massaging it with his fingers, squeezing it until his knuckles ached.

He moved his hand with the stone toward the flames, then through them. But the flames had already shifted into a blue spectrum; it was now a cool fire and didn't burn him. He put his entire arm into it, placing the stone in the center of azure fire. Then slowly, he withdrew himself.

The stone began to feed on the blue light, sucking it in greedily. The diminishing fire struggled, wavered, snapped, gasping like a living thing. As the fire was consumed, from the remnant needle of gray smoke there burst forth an enormous black bird, which soared out of it with a scalding wail of pain and death. It spiraled up with a great rush of wings, a projectile toward the nearest star.

The man laughed triumphantly, gloating. He shouted, "*Ahne! Akita mani yo!* For the One Who Observes Everything As He Walks! Artie Stewart!" The last blue flame winked out.

Heavy darkness reigned again, until he jammed a wrinkled Marlboro between his tobacco-stained teeth, and lit it with his last match.

In back of the Stewarts' rented clapboard house outside of Derby, Oklahoma, the kitchen door suddenly slammed with a bang. Even at a formidable three hundred pounds, Brother Oscar Creekmore flinched at the sound. Involuntarily, he pinched Deborah Stewart's hand where they were kneeling on the threadbare living room carpet. Deborah squealed in pained surprise.

"Forgive me, Jesus," Oscar whispered apologetically. They had been preparing to pray. Now the object of their prayers was walking down the hall with loud, self-assured steps.

"It's all right, Deacon," Deborah said softly. With her free hand she

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smoothed the rumpled skirt of her pink uniform. She was a cafeteria worker at the local elementary school. "Hello, Artie."

The footsteps halted. A lean boy stood in the doorway. He was fifteen, but he was already five feet, ten inches. Oscar knew the kid was glaring at him from behind those punk, midnight-black shades. To Oscar, Debbie was cute as a bug, cheaper to bonk than a whore. However, Arthur was something else altogether. *Why the HELL does this boy always make me feel like melted butter on toast—like he could gobble me up if he wanted to? And me a full grown man*! Oscar was aware that he handled the baffling boy all wrong.

"Ahem," he said. "Will you join our prayer circle, son." It was not a question.

Artie Stewart frowned, tipping the shades on top of his head. He had long brown hair bound in a casual ponytail. Actually, he was so bright it was reflected in the controlled mannerisms with which he carried his body and personality, but Oscar was too pompous to realize it.

Artie said resolutely, "No, Ma."

"Artie? Honey? Don't be rude to our guest—"

Pop-snap. Artie exploded a bubble gum bomb of Bazooka, like the crack of a whip. Oscar squeezed her hand again.

The boy said carefully, "Gimme a holler if you can't get up off the floor there, Oscar. I might be able to haul you over to the sofa. If I want to break my back, that is."

"Oh, dear," Deborah said timidly, while her son continued down the hall.

Oscar brayed, "Deny the Lord Jesus, Arthur, and you'll be sor-ry."

Artie snorted. If the Deacon of Blubber thought he could shame or scare him into capitulating, Oscar was a stupider fool than Artie believed he was. Dark brown eyes fierce with a restless intelligence, Artie slammed his bedroom door too. It was his final word on the subject, at least for today.

He threw himself moodily on the narrow bed in his cheaply furnished room. This evening he wished bitterly that he was taller, older, *something,* so he could thrash Brother Oscar to Kingdom Come. Maybe then he wouldn't be plagued by the droves of religious fanatics from the Pentecostal Holiness Church, whom Deborah invited over to change his mind about coming back to church. But Artie was through with holy rolling. Of course, whupping Oscar was merely a happy pipe dream. Artie's current realities had a more unpleasant substance.

Like how tough things turned when Artie's father, Darryl, had split five years before, when his little sister Janey was two. Darryl lived in Ft. Smith now. They never saw him, though he called once in a blue moon, mailed them Christmas presents and birthday cards. His support payments were erratic but Deborah was too weak to file a legal complaint.

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against him. Darryl counted on that, Artie was certain of it. Practically the only time in her life she'd been assertive was the day she told Darryl to quit horsing around with other women. He'd packed up and left. It was a cruel thing to do, and they got divorced.

Artie worried he might be taking advantage of his mother's submissive nature by refusing to go to church, but fervently hoped not. He just didn't want to, he wasn't being mean.

He sighed, feeling sorry for himself below the curling, colorful posters advertising Indian powwows on the walls. He collected them although he wasn't an Indian. He did have one huge poster of *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*. This display was so important to him he kept it framed under glass.

Artie Stewart planned on becoming an archaeologist himself, somehow. He was smart enough, the counselor at school said he tested in the genius level with an IQ of 170. His grades weren't a problem, either; he breezed through school with a perfect 4.0 average. He should have been enrolled at the School for Gifted Children at the University of Tulsa, but Deborah never could work that out. Money was the problem, always and forever, the substantial lack of it his most consistent reality. It bothered him to watch Deborah work so hard and them still have essentially nothing. Well, it was mid-May, school was about out. He could soon start mowing lawns and picking blueberries to help out, precious little help though it was.

Lately, however, Artie had been working on a big score. If he could win the five thousand dollar first prize at the catfish noodling contest in Spavinaw this weekend, he could afford to enroll in college this fall. The counselor would arrange for him to take the SATs this summer. All he had to do was drag the heaviest catfish to shore—because that's what noodling was, catching fish with your hands—and he'd be on his way.

"So great-t," he crooned. He swung his legs off the bed and grabbed his jacket.

When he opened the door and switched off the light, a puny, sweet voice from across the hall asked, "Artie? Can I havea drinka water?"

He paused in his sister's doorway. The shades shuttered her tiny room in a pre-sunset gloom. There was a vague lump on her chest; Matilda Patricia, her Cabbage Patch doll. Janey kept an old snapshot of Darryl under her pillow. She was frantic with guilt that she didn't remember him. When she went to church with Deborah she dutifully pleaded with Jesus for a real glimpse of her father's face. *Imagine, ol' Darryl's face a gift from God.* Artie kept telling her all she needed to do was look in the bathroom mirror when she brushed her teeth, because she'd inherited Darryl's wide blue eyes and wispy blond hair. She had confided in Artie that she was afraid she'd die before she saw her father again, a seven-year-old girl. Grim stuff like that made Artie feel even more desperate to achieve

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early in life, so he could show her that he'd always take care of her, that he was dependable, unlike Darryl.

Not unkindly, he said, "Janey, if I let you have a drink you'll pee in your bed."

"Uh-uh." She yawned. Her breathing deepened, then caught. She was awake again. "Artie?"

"Still here."

"Love you."

Filled with an overwhelming sentiment for her, he replied gravely, "I love you, too. Go on to sleep." But she already was; delicate and strong, beautiful and messy, young and old Janey Stewart. Artie hoped Deborah wouldn't ruin her, stamp out his spirited baby sister into an exact, mousy copy of herself. But he honestly didn't see how his staying here could prevent that or not. No, Artie was going to win the noodling contest prize money—with a bit of untoward help—and then he was going to split too. Only he'd be back to visit. Regularly.

Passing the living room, Artie was distracted and offended by the sight of Creekmore clutching his mother by her derriere. Although Deborah wasn't resisting (she wouldn't, isn't that why she married Darryl, because she got pregnant with Artie?), he commented with cold hostility, "You're a married man, Creekmore."

Oscar harrumphed, releasing her with obvious reluctance.

Deborah looked embarrassed, anxious eyes following her son. "Artie? Honey? Where're you going?"

"Blackhawk's." He shut the kitchen door quietly. He didn't want to see it if his mother returned to the deacon's embrace. He understood that she was lonely, but anybody was better than that lump of shit. Hearing their voices echo from the front porch, Artie figured his relief was childish, but he was glad just the same.

Why, if Porky Pig knew what he was going to do at Blackhawk's, the obnoxious deacon would probably shit a thousand bricks of envy. He began jogging down the country highway, breaking the silence of it with snide laughter.

Artie peeked through a certain hole in the side of Charlie Blackhawk's dilapidated barn. He grinned roguishly. LaDonna, Charlie's great stepniece, was bringing her uncle supper this week. It was Wednesday, so she was waiting in the barn for Artie while Charlie wolfed his meal up at the ramshackle house.

Artie licked his lips, rubbed sweaty palms on his Levis. A nearby squirrel chittered nervously. Maples and scrub oak bowed in a gust of end-of-the-day spring wind, as the sun dropped redly behind the deserted road in the hazy distance. A whippoorwill called out plaintively, impatient for nightfall. Artie sauntered around to the double barn doors, and stepped into the light.

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LaDonna MacIntosh cocked an eyebrow at him. She was already splayed out seductively on a pile of clean hay. She was two years older than Artie, exquisitely Indian, with a flared nose, rounded face, flashing black eyes. Not beautiful in a conventional sense, but noticeable. He didn't even remember how or why it all began. They didn't date, exactly. They even went to different schools, she to the Sequoyah Indian school outside of Tahlequah. Theirs was not a public tryst, yet it was curiously adult in its discretion. He figured he embarrassed her because he was white, and she full-blooded Native American. But she was glorious, and crazy about him, Artie knew that much.

Crisp black hair twined around her slender bronze wrists and elbows like velvet corsages, LaDonna sighed. "Don't tease me, Artie."

He grinned. "Tease you?"

"Come here, you sassy white boy."

He lunged across the barn and she shrieked with eager giggles. He fell on top of her twisting body; everything that happened when they were together was uncanny, perfection.

She gasped, "I can't move my arms, Artie!" She squirmed, buried beneath him in the hay. "Let me—please, Arr-tie!"

Rolling off her, he said, "Do it." She yanked her T-shirt over her head. She had come prepared, she wore no bra or panties. He placed his hand gently on her expanding nipple; she was dark and luscious like a stormy sky. "Jeans," he whispered. She hurried. They slid off her like water, pooled at her bare feet. She caressed him, searching urgently for his zipper, wild for him like always. "'Donna? If I ever thought you did this with anyone else, I'd kill you."

"Never." She plunged a hand under his waistband and he laughed, unbuttoned his jeans for her. "Means that much to you?" she breathed in his ear, touching him.

He struggled out of his jacket. "Yeah, it does."

"Ho, you don't fool me, Stewart. You tell all your snotty white friends about me."

"Nope." He kissed her open mouth deeply, moving mindlessly in the hay with her. It was true, though. This gorgeous girl was his lover, but he'd never told anyone about her. Who would believe it? He barely did himself except for now, when he was with her, on her, in her . . .

Afterward, the desire diminished yet somehow remaining, LaDonna snuggled her head against his shoulder. She had cried out like the whippoorwill with pleasure. She said, "Artie . . . I think I'm gonna get married pretty soon."

He was caught off guard. "Wh-at? Why?"

She hesitated. "It's expected."

He frowned. "Who expects it?"

"Everybody. We get married young. We have Indian babies by our Indian husbands."

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"LaDonna—" He was hurt, regardless of his own plans to leave her. "You don't have to."

"But, I do," she insisted. She sat up in front of him, hay dripping from her hair across her high, dark breasts. She seemed sad and perhaps she was, but she wanted it, too, he could tell she wanted to become Mrs. So-and-So Owlturd, or something.

He was disgusted. "Is that all you want? You're smart, 'Donna, you should go to college. Hell, you could go for free!"

"Well, maybe I will. Ain't no law against bein' married and goin' to college, you know. I never knew anyone as obsessed with college as you."

He said doubtfully, "Obsessed? I—"

"You don't understand the Indian community, Artie, there's a lot of pressure about marriage—that sort of thing."

He replied hotly, "I understand Indians better than you think."

"Because Charlie's told you all of his bogeyman secrets? Charlie Blackhawk is nuts, he's a loon, you know that." She studied him with a concerned expression. "Don't you, Artie?"

He defended his friend stoutly, scandalized she held her legendary relative in low esteem, "No! I don't know that at all!"

"Feeding stones, spirit houses, that junk?" LaDonna said skeptically.

Artie nodded, brown eyes alight. His long and amiable talks with Charlie Blackhawk continued to enthrall and fascinate him. He considered them tidbits of practice, preludes of amateur research to the real archaeology work he would some day be paid to do. Become world-famous for.

"Those things have a place among the old men at the dances," she said, "in the middle of the night, I guess. But if you're a Christian you can't take them seriously. Don't fool yourself, Artie, they ain't got anything to do with you. Don't mess around with them, neither. Just don't be a silly white boy, okay?"

"You're talking too much," he complained.

"That's because I feel bad about you, Artie. Most of the time I'm a good Baptist girl. We commit sins together, you got to admit that."

"Jesus! Bad enough my ma's a holy roller, now you're shoving that Baptist crapola in my face again. How come you never feel like you're sinning before we do it?"

From the house, "La-don-NAH!" Charlie was through eating.

"Oops." She leaped up gracefully, gathering her scattered clothes. "I got to go, Art."

He lay there buck naked and watched as her sculptured, bronze body was inevitably hidden from him. Among the creaking rafters arced to a vanishing point in the shadows above them, an owl stirred with a squeak and rustle of wings. The old barn was impressive in size if not in condition, with a pleasant atmosphere of gray board mellowed by time.

She leaned over him, doe-eyed, and kissed him longingly. "Besides,

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you're my adventure in this life, Stewart. Doing a white man, I must be out of my cotton-pickin' mind."

He moaned in protest, "Aw, don't get married, 'Donna, I love you! *Wish* I could marry you." He had no right to say it having no logical way to commit to her, but he said it anyhow; he lied. Not about loving her, but about wanting to marry her. He didn't, but if he could delay her decision for awhile—

"I'll meet you here on Wednesday in two weeks. I ain't even engaged yet, not to a blessed soul. I just wanted to prepare you. One way or another, this'll end for us."

Mollified, and convinced she would, indeed, be back, he mumbled, "Love you."

"I love you, too, Artie Stewart. But you'll never stay in Derby and you know it," she scolded. Then she ran out of the barn, her "bye" floating on the clear night air.

He waited for a few minutes. Rules of the game. *Yeah, she's right.* He would become an archaeologist, a pragmatist, a methodical *rich* workaholic. Yet now he succumbed to a kid-thing, wondering superstitiously about the gift of luck or fate that had brought LaDonna to him.

What happened between them was extraordinary, the love-making adept well beyond their years of age and actual fleeting moments together. He knew instinctively what he had with her many adults never found. But was there a specific reason for LaDonna? A price? Well, if there were he couldn't see them, so kidlike, he shrugged the nagging worry away and got dressed. Artie slapped hay off his Levis and strolled out of the barn, leaving the lights ablaze and the straw settling behind him.

She was on the other path already, a covered plate in hand, scurrying toward her new pink Mustang, errands of mercy and self-indulgent lust finished. She waved to him and he waved back, nonchalant. Everything was cool. Nothing was obvious.

Charlie Blackhawk glowered at him from his wheelchair on the haphazardly railed, unpainted veranda. Artie grinned up at him while 'Donna peeled out onto the highway shredding rubber.

"Hey, Charlie."

Blackhawk was a bit extraordinary himself. Artie knew all kinds of fascinating crud about him, things that would make Deborah die of shock. Such as, Charlie had been firmly entrenched in the earthquake of the Indian movement. That he'd been at Wounded Knee with the Sioux, had joined the Mohawks in their armed disputes against the Canadian Mounties. He was Blackhawk, sailing on the blustery winds of Indian radicalism. He'd sat in jail charged with, but never tried for, various illegal activities. The FBI kept an active file on him and he was proud of it. He was friends with Dennis Banks, with Brando. Until the auto accident that had crippled him.

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He could walk with a cane, but around the homestead he preferred his Wheels. He'd drifted down to Oklahoma to live near some of his distant Cherokee cousins, with whom he quarreled. Now he mostly stayed on his front porch and lived off his government subsidies while the world passed by. He was a decorated Vietnam vet, but refused to talk about the war.

Artie had stumbled on him by random chance. He wasn't sure why Charlie liked him. Maybe it was because he listened to Charlie's Native American folklore without interrupting. People weren't paying much attention to Charlie any more. Artie figured he was probably in his fifties. He had a big Cherokee/Dakota nose, alert eyes, and muscular tattooed arms. Red and black spirit-birds soared along his veins, so many of them they were practically antisocial.

Charlie growled, "Never trust anyone, Artie."

"I hear you." Artie flopped on the steps below the wheelchair.

Charlie flipped the lid off a Styrofoam ice chest and surgically extracted a can of Coors six-point. Wiping foam from his thick lips he asked, "So—how's it hangin', Artie?"

"What?"

"Your dick, man." Artie laughed. In a sly way Charlie was very intelligent. Artie recognized they had that much in common. Sometimes talking to Charlie was like taking a dare. Charlie added, "You been pokin' your'n in LaDonna. You two think I don't know about it. Surprise, surprise."

This revelation was *real* scary, but Artie managed to lie calmly, "That's not true. Me and 'Donna's just friends."

"Can you spell? What do b-a-r-n mean to you?" Charlie said, a tinkle of leather and beads, of turquoise and silver in his looping bleak braids.

"Oh, well, we *talk* in the barn."

"Yah, you talk. Then you fuck the hell outa her and she fucks the hell outa *you*." Charlie drank some more beer while Artie stewed in the silence for a couple of minutes.

Artie reasoned giddily, Gee! He doesn't *seem* angry about it! Still, he was afraid to admit it even though he and Charlie had been friends for two years, good friends. . . .

Blackhawk persisted, "Been what, a whole year now, ain't it?"

"I met her a year ago, yeah," Artie said lamely. "About."

"LaDonna, she real purty, I know how it is, boy."

"Listen, it's not like that—"

"She seduced you, right? She almost eighteen, you what, fifteen?" Charlie said knowingly. "She virgin, mebbe you even a virgin, hotshot like you."

"Yeah . . . I mean, I'll be sixteen end of summer."

"Why you not admit it?" Charlie said scornfully. "You ashamed of your Indian girlfriend?"

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"No! She's ashamed of me—" Artie blushed. He couldn't believe it, Charlie had snookered him! Nobody had done that to him before that he could remember.

"*Ku-hu-hu,*" said Charlie. It was a Sioux phrase he used from time to time, but all Artie knew was that it signaled anticipation. Charlie tapped on his shoulder and Artie nearly jumped out of his skin. But he was only offering a wet can of beer. Artie accepted it drearily, popped the tab, set it on the step. Charlie lit a cigarette. The smoke bloomed almost eerily from his wide nostrils, hung there dead in the accompanying mist of beer fumes. From inside the cloud he remarked, "She just think she seduced you, o' course."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Artie demanded crankily. He was tired of this conversation already.

"You a special person, Artie. You real smart, a good-lookin' fella. Charismatic; *akita mani yo,* You Observe Everything As You Walk. You different from any of these butt-pickin', beer-gut, dumb-ass, red-necked white people around here. You know it, I know it. Who else? That counselor at school, the guy put all those fancy dreams in your head, he know it, too. Ever'body else, they don't know nuthin', they only feel.

"LaDonna, see, she an Indian gal so she feels it more than most do, but she don't understand it, either. She just let it make her give herself to you, over an' over."

Artie scoffed, "Aw, that's just a bunch of horseshit, Charlie. We—like each other. The feeling's mutual, equal.

"Look, we've been careful. No way she'll get pregnant if that's what's bugging you."

"Shoot, am I buggin' you, Artie?"

"Besides, it isn't any of your business, is it?" *Oh, brother!* Artie cringed, and chugged his beer. It burned down his throat. He didn't even like beer.

"Yah, you're a man full-growed in the b-a-r-n with her, but out here with me you're nuthin' but a whitetrash kid," Charlie said menacingly.

A renewed wave of hurt shivered through Artie like chills. He allowed it to show on his face in the light streaming from the house, when ordinarily he wouldn't bother, not for anyone else but this one man. He whined, "You never talked to me like that before, Charlie, I thought we were friends!"

"So did I. Now I ain't so sure neither, because you just a white man screwin' my red niece. You use your friendship with me to rendez-voo with her. An', you ain't just screwin' her, you casting a net of spells over her. She sees you, off come her clothes an' her thighs spread apart. She your *winu,* your captive woman."

Outraged, Artie yelled, "How do you know all this stuff, and I'm not agreeing it's true, either! You been spying, creeping down there watching us?"

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"No, boy, I fly," Charlie replied with a straight face.

Astounded, Artie wondered briefly if 'Donna was right about Charlie. He was sure talking like a nut now. Because he couldn't think of anything else, Artie commenced to hollering again, "You're a *shitty* drunk, Charlie, you know that? What the hell, me casting spells is absurd, it's not like that at all! I love her, *you* don't know, I love her so much!"

"Oh, purty words," Blackhawk said sarcastically. The chrome on his wheelchair began vibrating as if he were about to launch into orbit, and for a second, Artie believed he might. "You luuv-vv her. You ever call her on the phone? Take her for a walk? Introduce her to your ma? It don't strike you as strange that all you do togedder is what you do in the barn?"

It *was* very strange hearing it put so bluntly. Temper beginning to fizzle, Artie cried, "That's the way she wants it, because I'm too young, because I'm white, because—I don't know, okay?" He shut up, sinking in a glum reverie. After a minute, he confessed, "I bought her earrings for Christmas. I gave 'em to her, ask her. Charlie . . . 'Donna's this—beautiful creature who loves me, I don't know why! Does there have to be a reason?"

In a more placating tone of voice, Blackhawk said, "My niece is a craven fool. An' it's too damn bad you fond of her, you should be, but I don't like it. I'm askin' you now, man to man: Let her go before you consume her soul."

"Jesus, 'consume her soul,' are you *kidding?* Charlie, for Christssake, you know what she told me tonight? That she's going to marry some Indian dude one of these days, and hey, you know if I win the noodling money I'm gone in September," Artie declared in self-defense.

"I decided that ain't soon enough. I want you to pick up the phone in there, call her and tell her you won't be touchin' her no more. Do it for your buddy, Charlie. Do it right now, an' it's forgotten between us."

Artie rebelled at that idea, because of course he wanted LaDonna's company for as long as he could have it. He said firmly, "No. The phone's too impersonal. I couldn't do that to her."

Blackhawk rumbled, "I don't want you seein' her again!" He fumbled for his aluminum cane.

Artie leapt up, eyes bulging. "Are you gonna hit me with that, you old fart?"

"Might." A silhouette in the yellow light spraying from the house, Charlie waved the cane around over his head like a swishing sword; *swoosh-swoosh-swoosh* . . . Eventually, he lowered it, saying mildly, "I fed your stone."

Artie was flabbergasted by this swift reversal of subject. He stammered, "Oh, y-yeah? You did? Where is it?"

"Inna shoebox on the kitchen table," Charlie said, but Artie had already busted through the screen door.

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A sudden storm of ugly black moths collided against the rusted mesh of the screen, where they fluttered helplessly for a moment before dropping on the porch. Crawling feebly, they massed on the edge of the top step, then stampeded over like a herd of crazed cattle. Charlie watched them for thirty seconds, then dumped another can of Coors in his lap. He guided his chair into the house, crunching moth bodies under the wheels.

The house was cluttered with the odds and ends of the weird and tumultuous life Charlie had led. For his Wheels there were crisscrossed paths through dusty furniture, teetering stacks of boxes full of magazines, guns, newspaper clippings, and bizarre mail-order right-wing, left-wing, and plain unclassifiable literature. *The Insidious Jewish/Catholic Conspiracy* lay on top of an issue of *Time* magazine. The kitchen sink brimmed with dirty dishes and fat, scurrying roaches. The whole place smelled of garbage and tobacco and cat box. Charlie loved cats, but they invariably went wild on him out here in the boondocks.

The current feline boarder, pure white and yowling, curled around Artie's legs. He kicked it lightly. "Get away from me, you fleabag." Artie snatched up the orange and black Payless shoebox from the table like it was unburied treasure. He held it to his ear, saying, "Is it a-LIVE?"

"Yah. When the time comes, the spirit in it'll live," Charlie replied from the flotsam of his living room.

Artie was excited. "That was a rhetorical question, Charles. R-h-e-t-o-r-i-c-a-l, spells it don't require an answer."

"Oh, it don't," Charlie said snottily.

Artie brought the box over to the older man and knelt beside the Wheels like a supplicant before a king. "What did you feed it with?"

"Fire."

"Oh, heavy-duty. Can I touch it?"

"No. Not till you need it."

Artie tossed the lid away. "Ooo," he said.

The stone, one he had carefully searched for, was as flawlessly smooth, powder-white, ovoid and wonderfully ancient as a rock could get. It didn't really look any different, but Blackhawk had agreed to apply a bit of Injun karma to it, to help Artie win the noodling contest. Therefore, it must be different because it was supposed to attract a big flathead.

Artie had no qualms about sort of cheating for the most important thing he'd ever wanted. He didn't know how the stone was fed exactly, since Charlie had crabbily insisted on privacy for the ritual. But Artie wanted to believe in the stone's potential. He rationalized he was merely applying a little practical folklore to his effort. He announced his approval and appreciation, "This is so excellent, man! Thanks a lot."

Charlie apparently wasn't interested in compliments. "This what you do, an' you listen. After you touch the stone put it on the riverbed. You'll lose it, then, underwater, but that don't matter, just make sure it's on the

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bottom. Mud, sand, that don't matter, either. Don't touch it twice. Then you say this:

"Noodle you, noodle me.

"Father catfish come swim along,

"Nearby to see."

Artie's shout of laughter politely faded. He wrinkled his nose circumspectly. "Sorry, Charlie, but that's awful poetry."

"Ain't poetry, it's a chant, dummy. It don't translate too good in English, it's better in Lakotah, yah—Sioux words is big medicine."

"Teach me the Lakotah words."

"No, I done said 'em for you already when the stone was fed. Besides, I don't trust you with 'em. You might garble 'em, then where'd you be?

"Stone spirit needs control, the proper conditions, respect, or it turns on you, see? The chant and the stone'll bring your fish, but just once, because it'll want to escape to a deeper pool what won't be drained, or hide back in its nest, somethun' like that. It won't wanna die for your ambitions.

"You have one stone, one chant, one chance." Charlie squinted. "There's no written guarantees. No money refunded for customer dissatisfaction."

Artie, who hadn't paid him a dime, fondled the box much as he had fondled LaDonna.

He exclaimed, "Thanks a lot, Charlie! You're the greatest—"

"Yah, the greatest shaman, most powerful medicine man the Cherokee got in modern times. But nobody appreciates me," Charlie muttered. He slurped the remainder of his beer noisily, then crumpled the can. He pitched it toward the kitchen where it bounced off the door frame and clattered on the floor. The white cat attacked it furiously.

Artie watched him suspiciously, feeling for the shoebox lid. He stood up hugging it, frowning. "You never told me you were a medicine man, Charlie. How come?"

"Why, you must be an idjit, boy, and you supposed to be so damn smart. What the hell did you think, that just anybody knows what I know? Aww, get out, white boy. You the worst mistake I ever made."

Artie didn't like that at all. "Charlie, what's this 'white boy' crapola, huh? All of a sudden I'm 'white boy' to you? You prejudiced, or something?"

"We're *all* prejudiced, boy, each an' ever' soul who walks this earth! We're all partial to our own people!" the Indian yelled. "I said get out, white boy! You deaf? You a deaf butt-picker? Get out!"

"Okay!" Artie said hoarsely. He stalked out the screen door stinging from the insults. It banged behind him rudely.

But he felt the box in his hands and he forgot. He forgot 'Donna, and the queer, intense arguments with Charlie tonight. He never noticed the moths strewn every which way like sawdust. He just stood there and

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prayed to his god, College, that this inanimate object would help him win five thousand dollars.

In sprinkles of starlight, he called wistfully, "I'll let you know what happens." He skipped down the steps and took off like a young deer into the dark.

Charlie rolled on the porch, saw the barn lights flicker out. But he couldn't see *akita mani yo* then.

"You do that," Charlie Blackhawk said savagely, knuckles trailing listlessly on the porch like a chimp. "Artie's *wiwanyag wacipi* (sundance), yah, Artie *slukila* (child's penis) or *sluka* (adult penis)?" *Artie, the only person worth a damn 'round here too.* Yet there was a price to be paid; nothing as mediocre as jail. Charlie mourned aloud, "Who's gonna listen to me now?"

While the wheel of the galaxy, of *tacansina,* the corpse carrier (the Big Dipper) rotated over him, he relentlessly drained a few more beers. But they didn't make him feel any better.

Dawn came, a gold and crimson cloudless silence across the water. Artie munched heartily on an Egg McMuffin where he sat on the grassy bank, a thousand feet downstream from the high gray turbine outlets of the Spavinaw Lake Dam. He'd left home at midnight Friday, walked or hitchhiked to the McDonald's in Spavinaw where he hitched a final ride out here. He was early.

Noodling was legal in the area below the dam for three days following the closure of the spillway gates, whenever the Corps of Engineers wanted to inspect the structural integrity of the dam. The Oklahoma Fish and Wildlife Department encouraged citizens to wade in and help themselves to the bass, crappie, and catfish that became marooned. The prize money was a promotion of radio station KHIC, and they sponsored the contest.

The water level was rapidly shrinking now that the spillways had been shut for seventy-two hours, remaining higher in the channel downstream where Artie was. He knew he'd need a bit deeper water in which to sink the stone. Deeper water equaled biggest fish. Not for him the puddle-hopping from sand bar to sand bar that other folks would do later, closer to the dam. However, the water couldn't be too deep. With a large, fighting flathead on your arm after you'd rammed your hand through its gill? In high water? A person could drown.

He knew that experienced noodlers built rock shelters in low water this time of year to entice catfish into building nests in them. He'd make do with the partially submerged cottonwood stump he'd already spotted in the river channel.

The equipment required for noodling was nothing complicated. Gaffs, spears, bows and arrows and dip nets were illegal throughout the year for the purpose of noodling, which was defined by law as "hands only,"

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and were against the contest rules too. Artie couldn't afford fancy diving gloves so he'd brought a pair of Deborah's rubber gloves, which offered some protection. He was wearing some decent hipwaders he'd found at a garage sale and purchased for four bucks. In spite of the dry spring, the water was nippy this time of year. The waders were a practical precaution.

A partner might have been handy, but Artie didn't want to share the prize money. He'd need witnesses, too, but he'd checked with KHIC yesterday and been informed they'd be bringing their remote broadcasting van in about half an hour.

Offshore a huge red and white bobber swayed on the water. He'd tied it with kite string through the nail hole of a sturdy metal yardstick. He figured a few more inches, when he could see the yardstick, then he'd find out if the stone could call a fish.

Mockingbirds and blue jays began to cackle at the rising sun. He'd watched a raccoon slip in the water hunting crawdads. No skunks, thank goodness, they were too aggressive.

Artie finished eating, and studied the channel. This was good water, dark green and rich with life. Not polluted, at least no visible pollution. No appreciable acid rain here yet. But there was a lot of activity, schools of fish were trapped or becoming fearful, sensing the river was changing. Splashes popped and eddied everywhere, marring the peacefulness of the hour. It would be hot today, he realized, on this, The Best Day Of His Life.

A tremendous splash instantly drew his attention upstream toward the buttresses of the dam. A spray of water was only now dashing down on the thinning river, as if whatever had made it had fallen from the opaline sky.

"A big one!" he whispered. *A flathead?* He'd assumed they'd nest by the cottonwood, and being bottom-feeders they didn't surface often. But the catfish prize paid the most. There was no sign of the yardstick, yet following his intuition Artie decided to go for it now. Charlie never had mentioned how long this might take, and the radio people were due any minute.

He stood up, looping the suspenders of the asparagus-green waders over his shoulders and cinching them tight. He didn't want to freeze his ass off in the pursuit of a college education if it wasn't necessary. He pulled the rubber gloves out of his jeans pockets and put them on. He flipped his longish brown hair out of his tense face, jamming it behind his ears fretfully. Heart pounding, he bent over for the shoebox and tossed the lid away. He grasped for the stone awkwardly, fingers fumbling for it inside the unfamiliar gloves—now he had it, real good.

Artie marched into the swirling water and gradually moved out in the channel beyond his bobber marker. He glanced around, feeling foolish. Nobody was here; hocus-pocus time.

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For a moment he held the smooth shape of the stone in his palm like a rare, mysterious jewel, then dipped it hesitantly just beneath the surface. Wet, the milkiness of it vanished into a melancholy brown. He plunged his whole arm in, wetting the sleeve of his old flannel shirt up to the armpit. He was shocked by the freezing temperature of the water crashing against his chest as he felt for the riverbed; *brrr!* Groping, he located the murky bottom and released the stone somewhere to the left in what felt like thick mud.

He straightened up shivering, babbling the chant, "Noodleyou noodleme—" blah, blah, blah. A paste of watery silt dripped off the cold rubber of the glove.

He was sinking in the mud. Irritably he thrashed his arms above the water trying to dislodge his feet. Too suddenly he was free, lurching sideways, a slow dumb stumble downstream. *Hope I didn't step on the stone!* As he regained his precarious balance, water foaming at the top of the hipwaders, he saw it.

"Wow, oh, wow!" he said, unaware it was a resounding cheer. *Charlie isn't kidding around!* There was a flashing throb of light arching up from the river bottom, a silent *tickticktick* of beckoning, bluish lightning. Artie watched the strobing, charmed and exhilarated. It must be the fire the stone had absorbed, he reasoned. Fire regurgitating in the alien environment of water by command of touch, call of chant. An actual, physical manifestation of an ancient Indian rite! For a few dreamy seconds Artie pondered a notion of the money he might rake in if he were on TV right now—but, this was Charlie's magic, not his, he couldn't steal it or preserve it. . . .

The flathead had come. Artie sensed it rather than seeing it, as a long shadowy pressure gliding by. Ghostly pale shad, bright perch and green bass suddenly scattered out of the water in all directions in a maddened flurry of diamond scales. Artie beheld one largemouth bass, realized it was maybe twenty-five pounds, a trophy itself. They were obviously getting the hell out of the way of something—enormous.

Disturbed by the idea of a fish too large for him to handle, Artie swallowed hard. He'd never considered that angle. He recalled a few years back when some old guy had snagged a flathead on a trotline over a hundred pounds, all grotesque head. How the old man had told the TV reporters it scared him so badly when he saw it he just let it pull his johnboat around for a couple hours until it got tired enough to bring into shore. . . . He'd never be able to manage a fish that size!

There was a roiling fin flash downstream, circling back to the active fed stone. It was a handsome, mottled orange and black; a seemingly endless body of orange and black. Artie's bladder emptied. He'd just pissed himself in his good waders like Janey did her little bed sometimes, and he didn't care.

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Dozens of fish erupted from the water, flying through the air like panic-stricken birds. He felt tails whipping against his back; a fin gashed his cheek, cutting it open. It was a thunderstorm of fish, a downburst of living slimy hail. He ducked as fish swooped past his face, crossed his elbows behind his neck to shelter his head. *Whamwham!* Fish hitting his ribs, stomach, butt, no way to dodge them just be pelted dizzy by them! He laughed maniacally, close to hysteria.

The flathead swam swiftly up the channel now, displacing shallow water as if it were a crocodile. As the sky cleared Artie knew this was no ordinary fish, but a monster Charlie Blackhawk had specifically arranged for him to meet. Fear now, which anchored him to that spot, and then he realized his rubber boots were submerged deep in the quicksand of silt again.

He watched it come, as in methodical terror he began simultaneously squirming out of the suspenders and trying to dislodge his feet by making stationary jumps. The riverbed was as heavy as cement, he realized he was working against himself, one action canceling out the other, and he quit jumping and attacked the suspenders. Yet Artie never for one moment believed he would lose this race, even as the fish raised its flat snout out of the water ten feet away, exposing a whisker-streamlined mouth as wide as his waist. It steered at him with a final blow of its tail against the water; ka-POW!

The flathead slammed into him like a fleshy torpedo, exploding the breath out of him. The creature knocked him completely out of the mud, but it passed over him and pressed him backward beneath the boiling surface of the water. He saw a wild, rotating world of beating mud, and for a few seconds it crushed him to the riverbed forcing more air from his lungs. He was screaming underwater, producing an aircoil of bubbles, and then the fish was gone and he followed those bubbles upward.

He floundered above the water, gasping, trying to get off his ass. He turned his body toward shore and lunged. But it returned, a cavernous mouth looming before him and it closed its needle teeth around his hips, pinching the rubber of his waders in a death grip.

Recoiling, slapping up a pitiful geyser of water, Artie heard the dim slam-slam of car doors from the access road beyond the crest of the hill. Then he was listening to the guttural *clickclickchirpclick* of its purring; everybody said catfish could talk and now he knew it was true. He felt the weight of its horrifying mouth, saw its merciless, infantile, beady eyes, watched its stinging black whiskers wrap around his chest like striking water snakes—and it was dragging him farther out. Artie Stewart was being noodled.

Smashing its head with butterfly fists, Artie screamed, "*Charlie, you bastard!*" He took a huge scoop of air in his lungs as it forced him under. Then he was inside the dark realm of the water again. Blue light flickered, "nearby to see."

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The only signs that he'd ever been there at all were the red and white bobber, the silver tip of the metal yardstick, and the shoebox washing into the rainbow-dappled waves.

Artie held his breath forever as the great catfish carried him down and through a catacomb of pools so deep no drainage or drought would ever affect them, in fact, no other soul knew about them except Artie. His chest, lungs, eyes were burning, bulging, he was seared from the lack of oxygen when the monster abruptly broke to the surface again.

Artie heaved for air, too stunned and sick with fear and faintly grateful, too, to struggle. He floated like a child in the patient jaws of the stupendous, leviathan-like animal. Its gills were so removed from him they feathered in and out below the water, while he hung just far enough out to breathe raggedly. He clung to its solid head reluctantly, like Jessica Lange had done to King Kong's gigantic thumb.

Then Artie realized he was only a few feet from safety. There was a sun-washed, sand-brushed beach, so very close if he stretched his arm out he could touch it. How to get free? While he sank in a turbid sea of primitive instincts his genius-level IQ seemed to fail him now when he needed it most. He remembered who he was, fought to think, understanding that what he did during the next minute meant life or death. *Oh, shit, oh Jesus! If I could wedge the fish's mouth open I could wriggle away! Two lousy steps, I'd be on shore*!

There was a spring-fresh, bright-green dewberry bush on the pleasant, slightly surreal beach. Artie hadn't noticed it at first. But now it preened its coal-black feathers and the movement captured his glance. Perched on the dewberry bush, a black hawk: It was much larger than a hawk, though, it was eagle-size, no, condor-size at least. Pure midnight wings, ebony eyes snapping at him like fingers.

Artie groaned, and began begging for his life, "*Charlie.* Charlie, I know it's you! Weren't you ever a teenager? Didn't you ever love a girl, even if she was the wrong girl, even if you didn't treat her right, didn't you still love her?"

The hawk opened its dark, razor-sharp beak, and Artie prayed it would speak to him. Instead it launched off the bush with a prehistoric screech, and soared in the tilted sky right over his face.

"*Please,* Charlie, no, don't leave me!" Artie shrieked.

The bird was gone. Artie was blinking underwater, eyelids twitching in spasms. Cold water cascaded into his sinuses, mouth, he was choking on it now and he felt the terrible pain of the catfish's teeth pierce his belly—*God, it hurts!* The golden sunlight faded, and it was all just bitter failure and absolute darkness . . . except for an undeniable, foreign weight in his right hand that he'd forgotten.

Blind, Artie held up his hand with the throbbing fed stone, moved it

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upward until he felt the wind touch his wet shirt, and he pushed the water aside, *shoved it* with the last ounce of strength he possessed, and heaved the fed stone out over the river.

Artie rolled from the catfish's mouth as it turned and dived after the stone, knocking him roughly with its gargantuan tail toward the beach. He unglued his eyes. He was on his hands and knees at the edge of the porcelain sand. Coughing and sputtering he crawled out of the freezing water, extremities completely numb and blood soaking through his shirt from the gashes on his stomach. He dragged himself by inches. He passed the bush, found a patch of mellow sunlight and there he collapsed, vomiting water and Egg McMuffin. He puked and urped while behind him the monster roared, creating a false surge of surf in its frenzy at the fed stone. Then the whole world reeled, trees became the sky, and Artie plunged into an abyss of unconsciousness.

After swallowing the fed stone, the great catfish cruised offshore with singular purpose, back and forth, back and forth before the sunny beach where the boy lay vulnerable. If it could have grown wobbly, polliwog legs and walked to him over the sand it would have done so. But there was a limit to Charlie Blackhawk's power. As the fish swam it began to fade. During one sweeping turn into its wake, it disappeared.

High in the stratosphere, a dark bird wheeled crazily on the frosty air. With a wailing cry, it, too, vanished.

Through the sharp eyes of the spirit bird he had seen very far today.

Charlie returned to his body slumping in the wheelchair in the barn, a body sapped by additional severe fasting. The chair rattled from the dissipating spiritual energy he brought with him. He gripped the armrests weakly, teeth gritted.

The sign of *wakantanka,* a white buffalo cow shimmered in the maw of the barn doors. It shook its massive bearded head, stomped its hooves like rolling thunder with a bellowing snort. Then it, too, was gone.

"*Wahn! Wahn!*"

Charlie clapped his hands to his face with a scream of disappointment, while resident fruit bats plummeted out of the rafters like black rain.

Artie woke with a start in his mother's clean but shabby kitchen, head lolling backward so limply from the kitchen chair it roused him. With an audible moan he raised his head.

His clothes were damp and wilted with mildew. He'd discarded the hip-waders and gloves somewhere. His moccasins were torn to tatters from the arduous walk home, because he looked like a lunatic vision, and frightened drivers had refused to pick him up. Blood from his smarting stomach wounds speckled the front of his wrinkled shirt, and resembled

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dots of river mud. Sand was embedded in his scalp like dandruff. He glanced drearily at the Kmart rooster clock; ten-thirty at night.

"Shit!" he yelled, seeing them.

Janey and Matilda Patricia the Cabbage Patch doll were sitting silently in a chair on the other side of the table, watching him with their big, blue eyes. Janey whispered to Matilda, "See? I tole you he wasn't dead.

"Artie, where you been? Mama's about to call-the-sheriff. Are you gonna be arrested, Artie?"

"No, knucklehead," he sighed. So exhausted he couldn't resist, he sort of folded on the table in the circle of his aching arms. He mumbled, "Go back to bed, Janey. Stop at the bathroom first—wait a minute, why're you up?"

"Sirens."

"Where's Ma?"

"Neighbor's. Artie? Why do you smell like gas?"

"Do not."

"Do, too."

Artie commanded gruffly, "Bed, Janey, please—go to bed."

"Okey-doke." Shuffle of Barbie slippers. He vaguely heard the bathroom door open, the toilet flush, the squeak of her plastic-covered mattress.

Staggering into the white-tiled bathroom, Artie slowly stripped off his sticky clothes, sore from head to foot. He threw the mocs in the wastebasket, they were beyond salvage. He turned on the shower letting the warm steam filter across the room and caress him. He surveyed his haggard face in the clouded mirror.

He felt so *old*. This morning he had risen a boy but now he knew he was a man, with all the accompanying burdens and triumphs of hard-won adulthood. And what a man would do was necessarily, fundamentally different than what the boy had done. A man would have the decency to consult his mother about his future. A man would pay his debts and not opt out for the quick, impractical solutions. A man would make an honest effort to spend more time with his lover than just every other Wednesday. Hell, a man would even be growing hair on his chin like he was. . . .

Janey was wrong. It wasn't gasoline she smelled but rather lantern fuel, souvenir from the picnics they used to have when Darryl still lived with them. Artie wasn't certain if the boy or the man inside him had used the fuel, because surely either one of them understood the subtleties of revenge.

He stepped gingerly under the spray of hot water, groaning as it lashed the tender, angry bite marks on his belly. He'd have to hide them from Deborah. Idly, he picked up the bar of soap, musing if it were possible for a fifteen-foot-long catfish to have rabies. . . . He began to shake uncon-

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trollably from his macabre brush with death. The man who was Artie Stewart stood in his mother's shower and wept like a little kid, but he knew it was okay. A man was allowed to cry when he really needed to.

When Deborah came home his clothes were sloshing in the washing machine, he was toweling his hair dry and fixing an omelet. She sat at the table, one hand kneading the other.

"Ma, I'm really sorry I was gone all day. I apologize."

"I was very worried, how could you be so inconsiderate? There's been a bad fire, too, Mr. Blackhawk's barn.

"Artie, honey, your counselor at school telephoned this morning. He reminded me how—brilliant you are. Then tonight Mr. Blackhawk urged me to send you to college. While his barn's burning he's talking about you. Artie, you haven't said a word to me about going to college early. I didn't know."

"Ma, I'll get a scholarship when I'm old enough."

"Your father owes us money. And the church could start a fund. Let's talk about it, son. Make some plans."

He nodded. The omelet was cooked, sliding on a plate like yellow silk. Artie was ravenous and plunked the plate and himself down at the table. Lifting a forkful toward his mouth he paused, asking, "Ma, would it be all right if I had company for Sunday dinner tomorrow?"

Deborah replied absently, "I've got a good ham in the freezer, I think. Who is it?"

"My girlfriend."

All of Sunday the temperature dropped and the humidity rose; such was the perversity of Oklahoma weather.

Near sunset, sour fog draped the trees on Charlie's property like coarse muslin. It was as if the smoke from last night's fire had reincarnated. Charlie stood before the black wreckage of his vast, tinderbox barn, which had collapsed in upon itself. Wisps of smoke like fairy wands still curled out of it, here and there. Fire companies from three counties had saved his house, but left a mess of tire ruts and general charred rubbish in the crabgrass-tufted front yard. He leaned heavily on the aluminum cane, a red blanket wrapped around his broad shoulders, unbraided hair flowing to his waist.

Without bothering to look, Charlie said, "Come to see your handiwork?"

Artie stepped up parallel with him, yet not right next to him. He whistled long and slow, like a descending rocket. "Jeepers creepers, there isn't anything left. Imagine." They stared at the dark husk of the barn together.

"The fire," Charlie reminisced, "belched out great balls of smoke along the ground like it were from a dragon's mouth, not ordinary flames. The

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firemen run in and out of it wearin' oxygen masks, lookin' like creatures from outer space.

"Big line of cars up on the highway, all the neighbors were here. Your ma the only one to stand by me, though, her hand on my shoulder. She's decent. You look like her.

"You shoulda been here, Artie, it was quite a spectacle. 'Course, you'd been and gone already."

Artie clenched his fists. "*Why,* Charlie?"

Blackhawk hobbled around to face him. "Because you *wicasa okinihan toka,* you a worthy, respected enemy. I coulda stuck my shotgun in your back, any time, an' emptied both barrels. But I didn't."

God, God that hurt! "Son of a bitch!" Artie shouted hoarsely. "You mean it was a compliment you tried to kill me with your voodoo catfish?"

"That's exactly what I mean. It were *sica,* what I done. Distasteful, tricky. I done things like that before, an' you knew it. I warned you not to trust . . . but, I don't wanna be a pariah among the Indian people. LaDonna, she gonna take me where I belong."

Artie was astonished. "It's you? She's gonna marry *you?*" Charlie was silent, eyes as unfathomable and colorless as an ice-choked lake. Suddenly, Artie laughed. "You haven't asked her—you're chicken! You *are* crazy! Why would she want an ol' gimpy, anarchist fuck like you?"

"She will," Charlie replied gravely. "White wolf tole me inna vision I had when I's about your age. Powerful visions may not be disregarded. LaDonna, she meant to be mine.

"An' her daddy, he worth a couple million, easy. I need money for—political reasons. Her daddy understands these things, approves of me. You was never supposed to be in it at all. You come sudden, like a cold north wind."

"So, you and her old man got her life mapped out for her? You're just a couple of lousy, mangy dreamers. Why do think she's with me? We're two of a kind, we can't be handled."

"I know it. Didn't mean a goddamned thing, neither, till it saved your hide yesterday."

Haunted, Artie shoved his fists in his jean jacket pockets. "But we were friends. I'm not wrong about that."

Charlie shrugged. "No, you ain't wrong. Some things friendship can't overcome. It struck me curious, you burnt the barn where you had her so many times. What you burn, yourself? Or your bridges? You going away from this dipshit town some day, an' you ain't never lookin' back, Artie."

"It was your b-a-r-n, *m-a-n.*"

Charlie nodded. "You gotta problem. Fire marshal out here today with his sniffin' hound dog. That mutt's damn near smart as me, an' sure smart'n you. The man knows it was arson, knows I ain't got any insurance either."

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On the highway a bright convertible blasted past the property. A girl drove it, a girl with black hair streaming behind her.

"'Donna's the key," Artie said. "I tell the county sheriff what you did to me, no way he'll believe it. But she would. Hmm, but if I tell her about you, you'll mention *me* to the sheriff. . . . Sounds like we got us a Mexican standoff, old, old man. I'm leaving, she's driving to my house for dinner." He moved quickly, grasping Charlie's cane in both hands. "What're you doing about the fire marshal?"

Charlie looked surprised. "Nuthin', you keep quiet, hell, I don't need no damn barn."

Artie yanked on the cane, and they grappled over it like a pair of juvenile delinquents, as if it were the booby prize. Tugging hard, Artie asked, "What happens next, Medicine Man? You sending a dinosaur to stomp me while I'm mowing somebody's lawn this summer?"

"Don't know anything 'bout dinosaurs—you beat me, I didn't intend to," Charlie said with a gasp. "But if you pull my cane away an' I fall down on that unforgivin' ground, I might!" They grunted, wrestling for it, stepping on each other's feet, gouging ribs with their elbows.

"If I take this cane away," Artie panted, "I reckon you'll stand there on your own two feet like everyone else has to. I grew up real fast yesterday, seems like you should've done the same in half a century—ha, ha, I got it! It's mine!" He danced out of reach, holding the cane over his head like a rifle, whooping like a warrior, kicking up his heels.

For a few seconds Charlie swayed as if he couldn't make up his mind what to do. He took two or three unaided steps in Artie's direction. Then his crippled legs buckled and he caved in. Just when he was about to hit, Artie caught him and stretched him out carefully on the spoiled ground. Bending over him, Artie straightened the red blanket, then laid the silver cane gently across his chest.

"Good-bye, Charlie."

"'Bye, Artie." Light footsteps, hurrying toward the road on legs strong and young and full of promise. Gradually the echo of them faded into the draping mist.

Charlie Blackhawk lay in his damp, weedy yard for a little while, listening to the wind talk as it walked among the tall trees. But it did not speak to him. O

CORRECTION:
"In the Star's Mouth," a poem in the October/November 1997 issue, was misattributed. The poem was written by William John Watkins.

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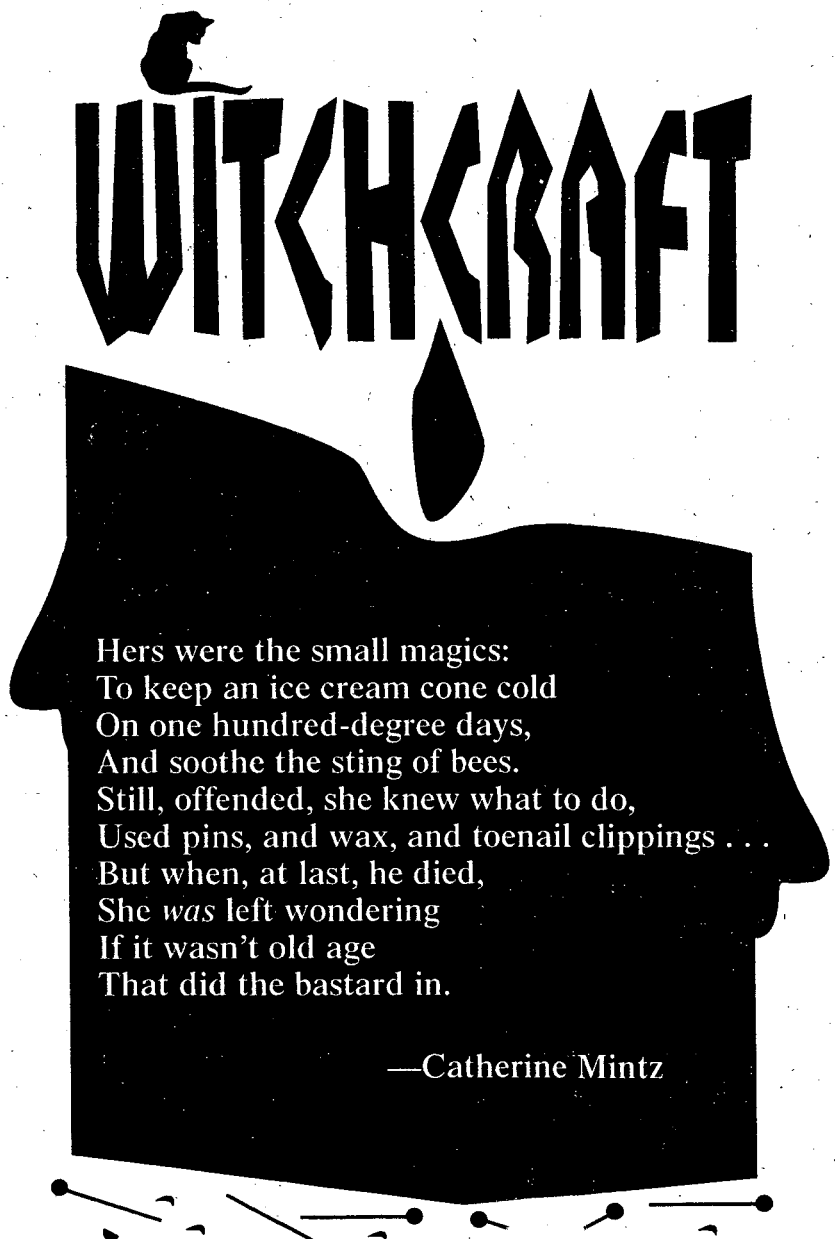
WITCHCRAFT
Hers were the small magics:
To keep an ice cream cone cold
On one hundred-degree days,
And soothe the sting of bees.
Still, offended, she knew what to do,
Used pins, and wax, and toenail clippings . . .
But when, at last, he died,
She *was* left wondering
If it wasn't old age
That did the bastard in.
—Catherine Mintz

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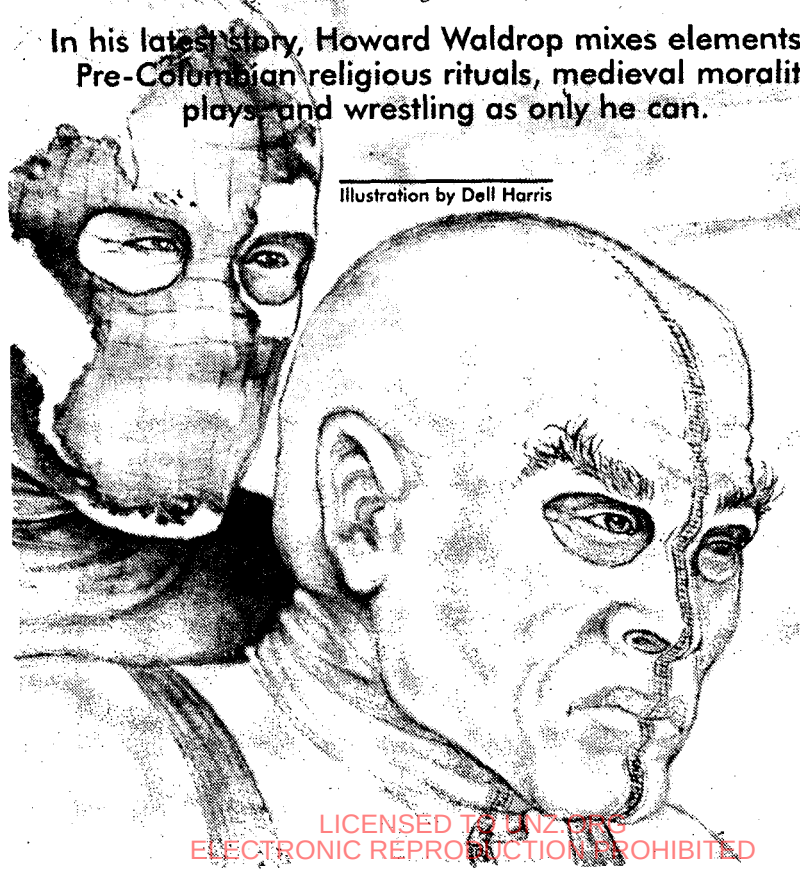
Howard Waldrop

EL CASTILLO DE LA PERSEVERANCIA

Copyright © 1995 by Howard Waldrop. First published in *The 21st Annual World Fantasy Convention Program Book*, Baltimore, 1995.

In his latest story, Howard Waldrop mixes elements of Pre-Columbian religious rituals, medieval morality plays, and wrestling as only he can.



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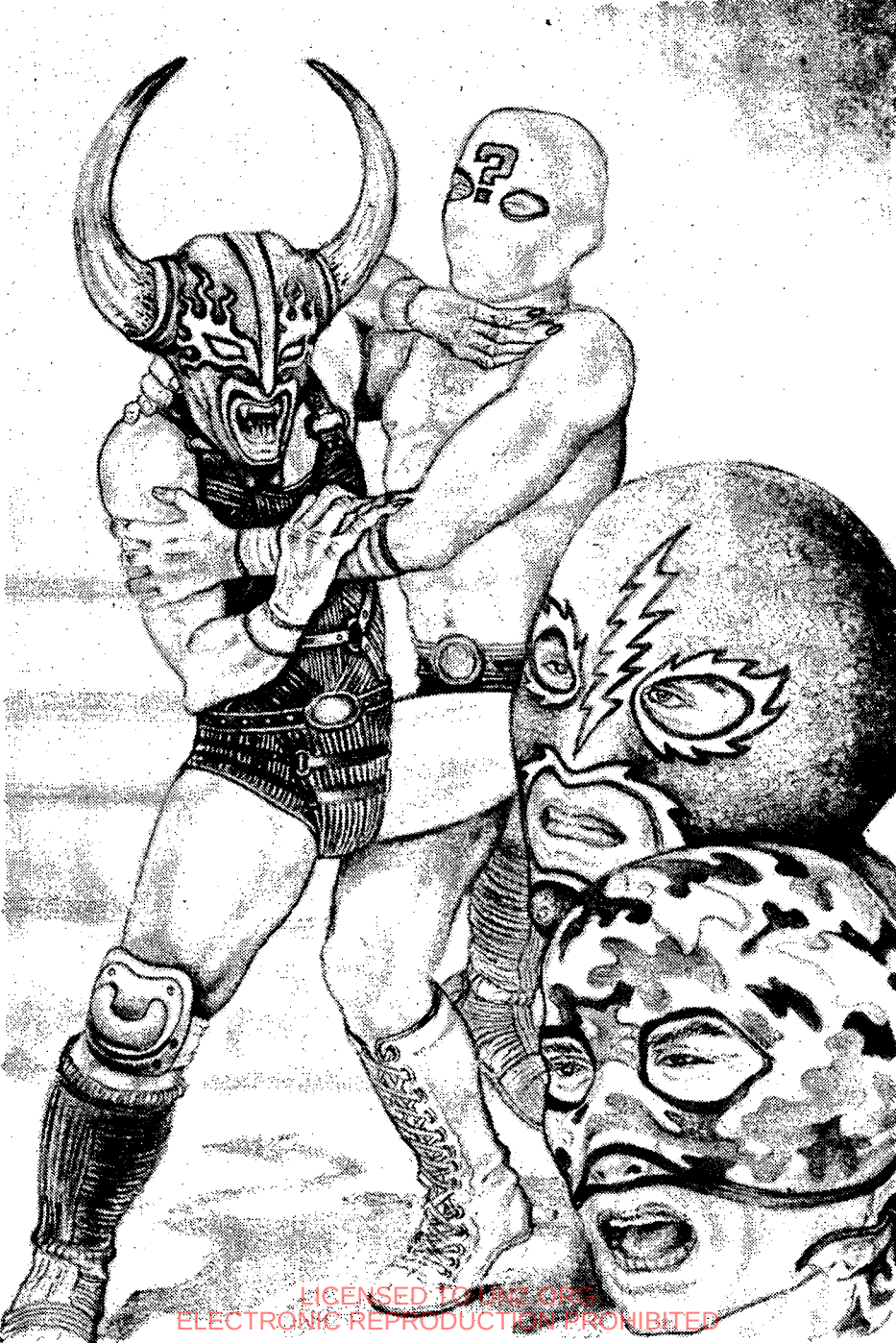

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1.

Every day, Rhonda had passed the bright pink wall on the Avenida Guerrero opposite the Bella Vista Hotel on the way to her art classes. Today it was neither bright nor altogether pink. Someone had sprayed a dark blue cloudlike smudge across three meters of it, and in the cloud, had painted in neon green, in Spanish:

The World, which has slumbered so long,
now begins to awaken . . .

A few other passersby noticed it, made *tssking* noises and continued on. One man, wearing two hats, a derby topped by a planter's hat, stopped, hands on hips, staring. He slowly shook his head.

"Next thing you know, the *alcalde* will ask for new taxes to clean such messes," he said, not to her, or to anyone.

Rhonda went on toward the Cortes Palace. She remembered how confusing the streets were to her when she had first come here six months ago. When she found that the College of Fine Arts was next to Hernan Cortes's old summer home, she realized she could find her way to classes from anywhere in the town except from across the barrancas, or from out past the Morelos State Penitentiary, places she'd only been a couple of times sketching for her classes.

She neared the old *zocalo* and tried to imagine what it had been like here five hundred years ago; probably too many guys in jaguar skins and parrot feathers running around.

There was a furniture and appliance store ahead. A man was in the front window setting up a display. She neared it. He was arranging dozens of alarm clocks—quartzes, electrics, windups—and clock radio phones on small tilted shelves, from one side of the large window to the other, reaching back behind him through a small doorway that opened back into the store. Small hands passed the timepieces out to him.

He looked up and saw Rhonda watching him, and smiled at her over his dapper mustache. He was dressed in a natty suit, *muy guapa,* the locals would say. He said something back through the small door; the thick glass muffling his words. A rectangle of cardboard came out. The man laid it down, laid his head on his steepled horizontal hands, feigning sleep. Then he picked up one of the clocks, shook it around like it was coming apart, and made big circles with his thumbs and index fingers around his eyes, mouth agape.

Then he turned the rectangle around. In Spanish, the sign said:

¡The whole world, which wants to sleep so long,
can now wake itself up!

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A chill went through Rhonda, a true horripilation through her whole upper body and down her right leg.

The man had a puzzled look on his face. He had placed the sign in its holder among the clocks, indicating his wares for sale with spread hands.

She slowly shook her head no.

The man looked crestfallen, then straightened himself, shot his cuffs, and crawled back through his little door.

As Rhonda turned to continue on to class, a 1965 blue and white Ford Galaxie convertible came by her, its top down.

In the car were three masked and cloaked wrestlers.

2.

The three men walked into the office of the registrar in the *colegio menor.*

"¿En que puedo servirle?" asked the woman at the desk without looking up.

"Sí," said the older of the three men. "I am Señor Nadie. These are my compañeros, El Ravo Tepextehualtepec, and El Hijo de la Selva, whom I was fortunate enough to pass on the street on my way here in my car, and offered a ride, as we were all coming here to inquire about classes."

The woman had looked up. The older man was dressed in tights, boots and a black cape, but had a bare chest, with salt and pepper hair on it. His mask, which like those of the others covered his whole head, had a question mark on the face of it. The second was in a head-to-foot body suit, with red shorts and boots, a yellow cloak, and on the chest and mask was a yellow lightning bolt. The third was naked but for a loincloth and jungle boots. His mask was woodland camo.

"You have your B.U.P.'s?" asked the woman.

"Certainly," said El Ravo Tepextehualtepec, whom all his fans called El Ravo Tepe, to differentiate him from all the other El Ravos in the sport.

"Day or night classes?" she asked.

"Day, of course," said El Hijo de la Selva. "Night is when we wrestle."

3. Hecho en Mexico

Outside, near his pickup, his dog barked twice.

"Hush, Hecho," he said.

He put on the face mask and the disposable gloves over his plastic coveralls, cranked up the compressor and began spraying primer paint all over the taped and mudded drywall.

All around were the sounds of hammering and nailguns. Two weeks

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ago this part of Yucatán was a newly drained swamp. Now it was three rows of apartment blocks on the outskirts of a town that had not been there a year before, workers' rooms for the byproducts of the tourist trade.

At least now they gave you gloves and coveralls and masks. When he'd started as a painter's helper two years ago, at the age of seventeen, you went to work and sprayed the stuff all week and threw away your clothes on *viernes*. You got the stuff off your body with paint thinner and Go-Jo Cleaner.

He could hear Hecho begin to whine even over the *brrrupping* noise of the compressor. "Hush!" he yelled out, muffled. He turned off the compressor.

There was a long whine, and the sound of shaking in the pickup bed.

He looked out. The rope with which he tied his dog in the pickup was frayed and hung over the side. He saw his dog running, a half-meter of rope dangling from its collar. It climbed a pile of lumber scraps at the end of the site.

"Come back here!" he said. As he cupped his hands to yell, he tore the coveralls open on the latchplate on the doorjamb.

Hecho lay down on the lumber pile, head between his paws. He had never done that before. *Loco perro.*

He turned to go back to the inside room, passing the stacks of medicine-cabinet mirrors at the front door. Why they had been stacked there, when half the apartments weren't even weathered-in yet, he had no idea.

He pulled down his facemask and pulled off the gloves, which were stuck now to the torn plastic coveralls by the primer paint, so he let them dangle. He'd have to get another pair when he put on new coveralls anyway.

The dog yowled and ran away.

He stopped. In the mirror, the torn plastic flapped like another skin. The gloves hung like newly shed hands from the ends of his arms. His facemask with a big smear of grey across it looked like another loose mouth and jaw next to his own.

He was turning to admire the effect when something put him on like a cheap suit.

4.

A slow Wednesday night at the Arena Tomalin:

After the prelims, El Hijo de la Selva fought Dinosaurito in a three-fall event. He won the first fall, lost the second, and won the third.

Then, to louder applause from the sparse crowd, El Ravo Tepe took on El Buitré Marvelloso. He won the first fall, lost the second, won the third and the match.

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Two masked women wrestlers allowed all but the most iron-kidneyed a chance to visit the *taza de retrete.*

The main event: Señor Nadie contra La Pocilga Desordenada, a Tabascan who had failed at sumo in Japan, and who had come back and sat on a series of lesser *luchadores* until he gained the chance to go against the top-rated masked wrestler.

Señor Nadie won the first fall with a combination of wristlocks and outside-bar-stepover-toeholds. La Pocilga won the second by falling onto Señor Nadie as soon as the round started. At the end of the third fall, Señor Nadie left the ring victorious while the maintenance crew tried to get La Pocilga out of the snarled net that had been the ring ropes and turnbuckles. Two spectators had been hit by the flying ringposts and were treated for cuts and bruises.

Such was wrestling in Quanahuac.

5. Sin Horquilla

He was at the company picnic in the park outside Ciudad Juarez to which he had taken his wife and children every year for the past twelve years. Today he was playing washer toss with three other older men while all around him younger people and their families played hundred-to-a-side soccer. The park was filled with screams of joy and pain, discord and harmony, like any other Sociedad Anonima outing.

Suddenly, the El Pato® sauce he'd been sampling since nine in the morning caught up with him.

"¡Condenar!" he said. Sweat broke out on his mustached upper lip. He took off for the line of old outhouses at the far edge of the park.

"That's the fastest I've seen him move in many years," said one of his co-workers.

He slowed a little when he realized he would make it. A woman came out of the one he was headed for, slamming the heavy wooden door on its tired screen-door spring. The local priest, there to bless the chalupas at the big sit-down outdoor dinner that night, came out of another.

"Excuse me, padre," he said, crossing himself. As he reached for the worn brass doorhandle, the horseshoe nailed above the doorway fell down with a clang. He hesitated, then went in. When he was through, he would find a rock to nail the iron thing back up with. The door closed behind him.

The priest experienced a horripilation that stopped and turned him. He looked around. He fixed his collar and shook his shirt cuffs where they stuck out from his cassock.

There was a sound like giant rubbery wings behind him.

Something hit the ceiling of the third outhouse from the inside. There

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was a thrashing around, and a smash against the walls. Then another series of thumps up against the inside of the slanted corrugated tin roof that buckled it.

A sound of low mumbling came from the outhouse, then a third thrashing, then silence.

The priest started toward it. He wondered if the man had suffered a heart attack or a seizure of some kind.

"Are you all right?" he asked, reaching for the doorhandle, looking around to see if he could see the company doctor.

He swung the door open. The man's head lolled, the whites of his eyes showing. Then they came down and snapped into focus on the priest.

"In Christ's name . . ." said the priest.

"Fuck your God," said the man, and headed for the line of cars parked across from the soccer field.

6.

Rhonda walked by the wall again on her way to meet Federico, the Italian student in her life-drawing class.

The wall had been painted over the week before—there was a pink swath, done with a roller, through most of the design. In another week the enamel would bleed through the pink latex, and the words would show again.

Federico was to meet her at the Cine, just off the Avenida Morelos. They were going to see *Las Manos de Orlak* con Peter Lorre, and *La Maldicíon de la Momia* con Lon Chaney menor. The Cine Morelos seemed to stay in business by showing films that had been on American television for fifty years.

She realized she'd gone one block too far on the Avenida Guerrero, and turned to her left. She saw one of the diagonal streets leading down the block behind the Bella Vista Hotel and headed toward it.

She passed an upscale cantina—one of the tourist traps, no doubt—and heard music coming out. Lounge music must sound the same in every country.

A smooth baritone came out of the speakers—she pictured the tuxedoed smoothie to whom it belonged. He did not have a mustache, and never would.

Then she heard his words:

> ***My world, so asleep in its bed,***
> ***woke to the morning of your love.***

She stopped, hand on the doorframe, and looked inside.

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The singer was old, bleary-eyed, and looked as if he'd come out second in his youth in a clawhammer fight. He was dressed like Leo Carillo, who had played Pancho in the old *Cisco Kid* television show, hat and all, or like a Latino Andy Devine. He saw Rhonda and smiled at her over his salt-and-pepper walrus mustache.

She turned and went down the street toward the Cine Morelos.

Far off in the distance the two volcanoes loomed in the last of the blue-purple light.

7.

The air was cool and smelled good outside the dressing rooms behind the Arena Tomalin.

There were already two cigarette glows in the dark against the far wall of the little courtyard reserved for the wrestlers.

The man who had just come out lit one of his own with a lighter from the left pocket of his dressing gown.

"Ay," he said, "Some night, eh?"

"We were talking of the same thing. Not at all like last week."

"During a night like this," said the man who had just come out, "I ask myself, what would Santo have done in the same situation."

"Ah, Santo," said one of the others.

"Or Blue Demon," said the other.

"They do not make them like Santo anymore. Such grace and sureness, both in the ring and out."

"Like when he fought the Frankenstein monster in the Wax Museum."

"Or the Martians, like in *Santo Contra la Invasíon de los Marcianos!"*

"Or when he teamed with Blue Demon to fight the Nazis in Atlantis!"

"The Vampire Women? What about those?"

"Which Vampire Women? *The Vampire Women* was *un roncador grande.* I spent days watching it one afternoon," said one of the men who had been there first.

"No, no. Not the *Vampire Women* movie, that was bad. The *Santo en la Venganza de los Mujeres Vampiros."*

"Oh, sí. Putting Santo in any movie improves it."

"Have you seen the Crying Woman movies? Or the *Mummies of Guanajuatos?"*

"Of course. Or the Aztec Mummy films. Ah, that Popoca. To think he was in love five hundred years with the dead princess. The pains he went through . . ."

"And *La Nave de los Monstruos!* Uk, Zak and Utir! Espectro of the Planet Death! Tor the Robot. That was a movie!"

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"To think how it must be," said one of them, "To wrestle cleanly, to be famous, to play yourself in movies of your own adventures. . . ."

They all sighed.

"What Santo probably would have done on such a messed-up wrestling night as this," said the youngest, "is to have tried to forget about it, and go home and get a good night's sleep."

"As I am," said the second.

"And me," said the third.

Their three cigarettes became flying red dots in the night, bouncing sparks in the concrete courtyard.

The door to the dressing rooms opened, they went in, and it closed.

8. Soy Un Hombre Más Pobre . . .

The limo dropped him outside his Mexico City office, at the corner of Salvador and Piño Suarez.

He went inside, nodding to the guard, took his elevator to the private entry to his office, went inside and put his sharkskin attaché on the corner of his desk. There were three pieces of paper in his IN box that he had to sign sometime during the day. There was a package on the credenza all the way across the office.

A light blinked on his phone. He picked it up. *"¿Bueno, y que?"* he said. It was the president of the American company he worked for. He listened. *"En seguida. Entonces. Sí. No. Sí, sí. Buenos días."* He hung up.

He got the package from the antique dealer and unwrapped it, using his mammoth ivory scrimshaw letter opener.

Inside was the Cantiflas chocolate mug, the carnival glass pitcher with the 1968 Olympics commemorative design etched into it, and a book, a recognition guide to European mushrooms. They were not for him, but gifts for executives of other companies who had an interest in them. He looked at them a moment, wondering at the things people spent their time acquiring. He started to call his secretary and reached for the key on his computer. He bumped the book off onto the stainproof pile carpet.

It flipped open to the chapter on morels, and an old 1000-peso note fell out. Once it had been worth $120.00 US. After the fourth devaluation, it was worthless. He bent to pick it up.

He realized it was *all* about money. Everything. Entirely. From beginning to end, every second of it, even from before till after.

There was a surflike pounding in the air. He looked up and knew what he would see, and sure enough, the four hundred billion coins, doubloons, sesterces, pieces of eight, yen, marks, francs, and pine-tree shillings washed over him in a cleansing, baptismal wave.

Now that he understood, he laughed. It was simple, so utterly simple.

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9.

In three different provinces that week, three new *luchadores enmascarados* appeared on Amateur King of the Hill match nights. One wore a red horned mask, one a mask that was the mask of a human head and face with a zipper through it, one wore the mask of a globe of the earth. The speed with which they dispatched all comers was the only topic of the conversation of those who saw them.

Who were those guys? Where had they come from?

10.

She poured non-dairy creamer into her coffee and watched it soak up all the brown color. Nothing that dissolves instantly can be good for you, she thought. When she had started classes six months ago, there were still pots of cream or milk at the end of the student cafeteria serving line.

It was mid-afternoon, a Tuesday, so her first break for lunch, the choice being ten A.M. Or then. There were few people there, the occasional professor, a group of provincial eighteen-year olds like a flock of birds, solitaries and couples.

She usually sat in the corner, as far away from the serving line as she could, so she wouldn't be bothered. Most local guys were pretty much jerks about women. So were most American guys; it was just that the local guys were more honest about it.

As she'd entered, she'd seen that the tables where she'd like to sit had people at them, but now as she turned away from the creamer, she saw they'd all emptied out. There were china cups and plates on the dark brown serving trays scattered around, napkins with lipstick on them, paper cups. As she neared the farthest table, she saw there was a paperback book lying, creased and dogeared, near one of the trays.

She looked up to see if anyone was moving away. No one.

She sat, took a drink of coffee, opened her microwave burrito, and looked at the book. A collection of dramas. But not, as she turned the pages, by Rudolfo Usigli or Lope de Vega, but a collection of medieval English Mystery and Morality plays, with transliterated Middle English on one page, and Spanish on the other. It was by a couple of Italians.

A double-dogear marked a play called *The Castle of Perseverance*. She turned back to the introduction, read part of it. It was evidently a play like *Everyman*, which she had seen in high school, with personified evils and goods and a (to the modern mind) yokel of a protagonist, like Goofy, only dumb. In this case he was called Mankind.

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She put the book with hers, finished her burrito and the caffeined chemical drink, and headed for her three P.M. painting class.

11.

He adjusted his mask and let himself into the apartment with a key.

There was no one there. He went to the music system and turned it on. A preset radio station came on, volume at six. He turned it down. The song was ? and the Mysterians' "96 Tears." When it was nearly over it faded and up came "Sleepwalk" by Santo and Johnny. It was the same all over Mexico; stations from the Estados Unidos leaked in all over the FM band. He wondered how powerful their stations were.

He loosened his shirt and found himself a Tres Equis in the refrigerador. He was halfway through it when he heard a key in the lock and the woman came in.

"Oh," she said. "You're already here. Sorry." She had a shopping bag and a grocery sack with her.

"Uf!" she said, putting the grocery sack on the counter, and opening the refrigerator. "The traffic! The crowding! I thought I would swoon!" She closed the door, the empty sack flew into the garbage. "They are tearing up Calle las Casas again." She walked into the bedroom. Through the open door he saw her pass back and forth, more or less clothing alternately covering and revealing different parts of her.

"Then I ran into the son of that French film director, the one who worked in Brazil so many years. The father, I mean. I still don't know what *el hijo* does for a living." She stayed out of sight. There was the sound of running water.

He took another swallow of beer.

She passed by naked; a second later she went by covered from neck to ankles, then came back by hopping through some garment on one foot.

"He tried to catch me up on some gossip that you would not be interested in. It made very little sense, even to me," she said.

He slowly moved the beer around in the bottom of the can with a slight swirling motion of his hand.

She stood in the bedroom doorway. She wore white silk hose and red high heels. The single other garment was a red and black lace cupless push-up bustier that ended at the navel, and from which the garter clips hung. She had on a thick woven gold-link necklace. Her glistening black hair stood out from around the Creature From the Black Lagoon mask she now wore.

"Come here, you big lug," she said, crooking her finger.

He put the beer can down beside the chair, stood as if in a dream, and began to walk.

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12.

—Caramba! What a fight! Now El Diablo Peligroso has Lobo Gris in the *cangrejo Monterrey!* The Grey Wolf is begging for mercy! Now the referee puts the question. *¿Que? ¡Grito Tio!* Yes, yes, Señores y Señoras; El Diablo Peligroso remains undefeated since appearing on the scene less than a month ago!—

—the inside-bar-stepover-toehold. Now Vestido Zooto works on—wait! Wait! Yes. *¡Cielo!* Carne Xipe has broken loose! He's under—now out! Wait. Yes, yes, now he has Vestido Zooto in the *¡alacran de pecho!* Yes, yes! The pectoral scorpion has done its work. Carne Xipe wins again. They are taking Zooto out of the ring in agony. His arms hang useless at his sides—

—The crowd boos. Not much has happened. El Balón Gordo reaches out—what happened? Oh, look, look! El Mundo Grosero has El Balón in his famous hold, *el sueño de Japón.* El Balón is groggy. He's reaching for—El Mundo is using only one hand—he's, he's looking at his watch! What a gesture! Late for supper, eh, Mundo? There goes El Balón. He's on his knees, he's falling. He's down. Goodness gracious! Mundo is already leaving the ring! Now the referee is counting *him!*—he's put one foot back in the ring—he's in. *Now* he's the winner. The crowd is on its feet—listen to them. They are booing and cheering at the same time! Never have I seen this! Never—

"Your correspondent has asked himself again and again; where did these *luchadores* come from? How could they rise so fast in the world of wrestling? What are their goals? they are all three undefeated. The fans both love them and hate them; they want to see them like the fabled Juggernaut, unstoppable. And they want to see them stopped, dead cold. And there are only three who could possibly do it: the three shining companions—they know who they are—sure, professional, persevering, unpresuming. The only question is: when and where will the fight be? The whole wrestling world; no, all Mexico asks. We await our answer."

Pin-Down Martinez
Estrellas de Luchadores

13.

Rhonda sat up in bed, chilled and panting. She'd had a dream that made no sense that she could remember; it had only irritated her that it was taking so long and nothing was happening. Then she'd jerked awake, thinking she was cold.

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Instead the room was stifling. She found her glasses on the bedside table, went to the window of her rented room and opened it.

More hot air came in. She undid her pajama-top buttons, stood at the window. The clock said 0110.

Around the edges of the four-story building behind the rooming house she saw soft flashes. She leaned out the left window.

Lightning played off clouds above the distant twin volcanoes. She could only see the shape of Iztacchihuatl, but saw residual flashes, which must be beyond Popocatépetl, and further south. Maybe the storm was coming this way, though most of their weather came from the west, off the Pacific.

There was no thunder; the storm was thirty kilometers away. In a minute or two came the faintest stirring of a breeze, so slight she did not know from which direction. The air coming into the room was slightly cooler. She stayed there, elbows resting on the windowsill. The clock said 0211.

She turned on the light and wrote her aunt, who'd sent her a blanket two weeks before, a thank-you aerogramme. Then she turned off the light and went back to sleep.

She was surprised to find, when she left for class the next morning, that it had rained during the night, and the streets were dark and glistening under a cerulean sky with not a hint of cadmium white in it.

14.

"I want flesh," said Carne Xipe, moving around the office ceaselessly. "I want them to worship flesh, the flesh, food, meat. As when the pyramids—battle, blood sacrifice! Sacrifice—" He rubbed the mask that covered his head, the mask of a head with a zipper through it.

"Of course you do," said Mundo Grosero, tapping a cigarette on the face of his watch.

"Bah!" said Diablo Peligroso. "Flesh is no good unless there is the worship of the power behind it. Inversion. Their religion turned upside down, backward. Renunciation. Flesh is just one way. No God! Evil. Ha ha. Let them know they are tempted, and there is nothing, *nothing* at the other end. Call on their God, hear an empty echo. I am the call. *I* am the empty echo. I want them to call out and only hear themselves calling out." His red horned mask, and the eyes in it, were filled with pain.

"Of course you do," said Mundo Grosero.

Carne Xipe and El Diablo Peligroso looked at him.

"And what do *you* want for them?" asked El Diablo.

"That's easy," said El Mundo Grosero, flicking out his Safari lighter so that the flame stood up to the end of his cigarette. A smile turned up

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through the Southern Western Hemisphere of his mask.

"I want to make them all just like *yanquis.*"

15.

"You have to fight them," said Señor Sanabria, the head of the wrestling *federacíon.*

"To paraphrase a boxer," said Señor Nadie, "We don't *have* to do anything but be Latino and die."

Señor Sanabria looked back and forth from El Ravo Tepe to El Hijo. "Help me," he said.

"I hate to say it," said El Ravo Tepe, "but the big question-mark guy is right. We know nothing of these gents. We don't know their aims, whether they are honorable."

"You've fought plenty of people," said Sanabria, "with, shall we say, *espiritus groseros* before. Especially you, Señor Nadie. Remember El Gorilla Acapulcano? El Gigante Gordo?"

"Those were merely dirty wrestlers," said Señor Nadie.

"Sí," said El Hijo, the youngest. "Or so I've heard."

"Then it's not the money?" asked the president.

"Of course not!" said El Hijo de la Selva. He looked at the other two. "Or do I speak out of turn?"

"I'd do it for five old centavos—" They all laughed "—actually, ten," said Señor Nadie, ". . . if I were sure of two things. Myself. And them."

"That goes for me, too," said El Ravo Tepe.

"Also," said El Hijo.

"Then," said Señor Sanabria. "I must bring up an indelicate inducement." He reached in his desk, pulled out some Xeroxed pages of typed copy.

"It's from Pin-Down Martinez, isn't it?" asked Señor Nadie. "He still uses that outmoded Underwood Standard at the wrestling magazine office."

"Only it's not for the *Estrellas,*" said Sanabria. "It's a guest editorial for the Saturday morning newspaper. He sent a copy over this morning." He offered it to Señor Nadie.

"Tell me."

"He says if you three do not take the challenge, he will believe for once and for all those scurrilous rumors are true, that wrestling matches are fixed."

El Ravo was on his feet. El Hijo de la Selva was looking for something to throw, and somewhere to throw it.

Señor Nadie held up his hand.

"¿Compañeros?"

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16.

¡GIGANTIC SPECTACLE!
ARENA TOMALIN
¡BATTLE OF THE AGES!

LUCHA LIBRE

FREE-FOR-ALL WRESTLING
STYLO TEJAS DEATH-MATCH
con Barbed Wire

Los Campañeros de los Arenas:
SEÑOR NADIE
EL RAVO TEPEXTEHUALTEPEC
y
EL HIJO DE LA SELVA
contra
El MUNDO Grosero
El CARNE Xipe
y
El DIABLO Peligroso

MIERCOLES 2 NOVIEMBRE en punto de 9
ARENA TOMALIN

¡Vds. Ahi o Vds un Trasnochadé!

17.

Rhonda was coming down with a cold or sore throat or the flu. She ached all over, but after her last class, she took the book she had found in the cafeteria to the college Lost and Found. She had been meaning to do it for a week or two, but had remembered it that morning, before she became really miserable.

"I found this book," she said to the student behind the desk.

"¡Ay, caramba!" he said. "It must be made of gold." He looked it over, and at the piece of paper in his hand. "Lucky you," he said, handing it over to her.

"Reward," it said. "Lost book. Anthology of plays. *Plays of Mystery and Morality* ed. Malcondotti and Prolisse. En Español with English text on facing page. Call NAhuatl 4-1009. Reward."

She picked up the phone on the desk and called someone who wasn't

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the one with the offer of the reward, but said that he would be back soon. She gave him her mailing address, and told him to pick up the book at the lost and found.

She put the phone back on the cradle. "The person calling for the book is named José Humanidades," she said to the student on the desk. "He says please make a note of that and not give it to anyone else."

"Efectamente," he said, reaching for a pen and paper.

Two days later, she received an envelope with no return address. Inside were two tickets to a wrestling match at the Arena Tomalin, and a piece of paper that said, "Thanks for finding it."

By then, her cold had already raged and was on the ebb tide, she was miserable, and had been taking cough suppressant with codeine for eighteen hours.

18.

First Federico was going with her, then he wasn't, then he was.

Rhonda started for the Arena Tomalin, which was used for every kind of sporting event in this town. As she turned the corner and saw the huge lines, she stopped. Never before in her life had she been to a wrestling match or considered going to one.

She'd had another big dose of cough medicine just before she'd left the *pension,* and had gotten a little unsteady on her feet.

She sat on the low wall across from the arena. She saw that TV trucks were parked off to one side, their satellite antennae pointed at the same spot in the sky. Why would anyone come to a wrestling match if it were on TV?

To her left, on another building, was a bright blue cloud spray, and in the middle of it, in neon green, the slogan:

That world, which has slumbered so long,
Now begins to awaken.

She stared at it. It was the only one she had seen besides that first one across from the Hotel Bella Vista. She got up and moved toward the long lines of people at the doors of the Arena.

"Immediate seating for blue reserved seat tickets through the blue door by the ticket booth," said an usher with a megaphone to the crowd. "Immediate reserved seating through the blue door."

She looked down. Her tickets were blue.

She left a note and a ticket for Federico at the window and followed another usher to a seat in the third row. She looked around. Television cam-

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eras were on platforms built around the domed ceiling of the sportatorium, and reporters with minicams walked back and forth in front of the ring.

There were four long aisles into the place. People rushed to and fro.

"¡Dulces de algodón!" yelled a man with a tray in front of him in which fluffy pink head-sized balls were stuck. *"¡Dulces de algodón!"* Rhonda noticed she was four seats over from the aisle, which probably meant she would be handing food and money back and across each way all night. Or however long it took.

In a few minutes, the announcer came out. The audience applauded and cheered. He began to speak, and they were with him until the word "preliminaries" came out.

The crowd was on its feet, booing and whistling. The booing stopped when two clowns dressed as masked wrestlers came down the eastern and western aisles. Their masks had large red noses on the front of them, their tights were baggy, and they had on boots with meter-long toes.

They went through all the motions. Just as they prepared to grapple for the first time, a huge bank of the arena lights sputtered out, then all the lights around the ceiling, except for those on the side of the ring with Rhonda.

Giant shadows of the two wrestling clowns sprang up onto the far wall of the place. They were ten meters high. Rhonda watched them, instead of the clowns, as did other spectators. The titanic figures swirled and swooped. The crowd began laughing and applauding. The clowns redoubled their efforts.

Soon both the noses were gone—one clown bounced the other one's like a jack-ball off the canvas mat. The second pulled an athletic supporter out of his shorts, put the other one's nose in it, whirled it around and around his head and let go like a slingshot, hitting the other right between the eyeslits. He fell to the canvas with a thud, stiff-legged.

The crowd roared with laughter. To Rhonda, who had been watching the big shadows, it didn't seem that funny.

They had fixed the lights.

Other people with reserved seats had begun to file in around her—she had never thought wrestling, like opera, was something you could be fashionably late to. The people had talked during the entire clown act, and now were talking through the match between the two clean-cut non-masked wrestlers in the one-fall, ten-minute time limit match.

Some people farther back were on their feet, yelling encouragement. Some people could get excited about almost anything.

She looked around. Still no Federico.

That match over, the crowd grew restless as technical people put up

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the two-and-a-half-meter-high cyclone fence with two strands of barbed wire on top, and two cages, at diagonal corners of the square.

Rhonda nodded in the warm air. The cough medicine was still working on her. The next thing she knew, there was a fanfare on the speakers, jolting her awake.

"Señores and Señoras," said the announcer, his voice echoing and rising, "Let's get ready to *escaramuzar!*" The crowd went crazy.

"The Challengers:

"From Ciudad Juarez, El Diablo Peligroso!"

The north door of the Arena flew open with Spielberg light effects, and coming down the aisle was a man in red tights with a horned, masked head.

"From Mexico City, El Mundo Grosero!"

The west door opened, the lights blinded everybody, and a wrestler with blue and green tights, and a mask of the globe of the earth came down that aisle.

"From the Yucatán, El Carne Xipe!"

From the south, amid the lights, came a man with a flesh-colored cape, flesh-colored body suit with red gashes in it and—at first Rhonda thought he had no mask on, but as he passed, she saw that his mask was the mask of a normal-looking head, with a zipper through it, all the way from the base of the neck, over the top and down to the chin.

The three wrestlers got to the ring at the same time and got into the little cage in their corner of the ring.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," yelled the announcer. "The Champions. The Compañeros of the Ring: Señor Nadie, El Ravo Tepextehualtepec and El Hijo de la Selva!!!"

The roar that went up was earsplitting. The three men bounded up the eastern aisle, waving to the crowd, and went into their cage, where the maintenance people waited.

"A Texas-style barbed-wire Death Match, no time limit, for the true championship team of all Mexico. Once the contestants are in, the match begins. It ends only when one team, or member of a team, remains conscious or in the ring. For this, there is no referee," said the announcer. "Officials of the Mexican Union of All-Professional Wrestling are explaining to each team the conditions of the match. . . ."

"What do you mean?" asked El Ravo Tepe, "no unmasking? The official said it was legal. What fun is it to fight another *enmascarado* if you can't take off his mask?"

"Would you like it done to you?" asked Señor Nadie.

"Has never happened. And never will," said El Ravo.

"I am of two minds," said El Hijo. "I would not like it done to me. In many ways it cheapens the sport. But then, there are some people who

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deserve unmasking. They are not worthy of the mask. Humiliation is the only thing they understand. I have done it once; the guy asked for it. But I didn't like it."

"The true *enmascarado* has no need of such displays," said Señor Nadie. "Would that we all had the spirit and wisdom of a Santo or a Demonio Azul. Then would we know when an opponent is truly defeated, rather than just unconscious. We could all, in a normal match, quit before the count, and still know we had won. Bullfighting must be a lot like that, only in the end, someone or something dies, and there must be blood on the sand."

The two others were quiet in the cage, then El Hijo spoke.

"I know one thing. Those *pavos* we fight will have no compunction about taking off our masks."

"Heads inside or not," said El Ravo Tepe.

Rhonda listened to the conversations around her.

"—a de J.C." said the man in the front row to someone else.

A candy hawker came by. Rhonda passed some jujubes and money across from right to left and left to right.

"Aw, go ahead," said another man to the woman beside him. "It won't hurt." He held up a candied apple. "Caramel. Look." He bit into it. "Yummmm."

"I'm on a diet," she said. "My doctor told me not to."

The guy with the fruit for sale stood nervously licking his lips.

"No," she said, finally.

"Aw, phooey," said the man. "Give me another one, though." He took the candied fruit on the stick and bit into it, turning toward the ring. He sat with one in each hand.

"¡Dulces! ¡Dulces de algodón!" said another concessionaire, beside her on the aisle. She noticed the small badge on his hat. Hummingbird Foods, Southern Division, in the shape of a smiling cloisonné hummer.

". . . so he burned up the meat," said a man with his hat on to the priest beside him dressed in street clothes. He bit into a potato-and-egg burrito. "Look, all he did was get some of the recipe a little wrong. No reason to get upset, just get some more meat and do it right."

"¡Achicharados!" yelled another foodseller. *"¡Achicharados!* Hot dripping *achicharados!"*

"I hope we get to see some real holds," said a girl who had not yet had her *quinceaños* to the boy beside her as she clutched a copy of *Estrellas de Luchadores* to her.

"¡Bomba zumbida!" said the boy. *"¡Una bomba atomica!"*

"Sure, we'll give you the horse," said a man in a business suit to another dressed as a rancher, "just put up all your property as collateral."

". . . John Wayne," said a woman. "When he died, everything changed.

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I said, things will never ever be the same with the Duke dead, I assure you that. Why, the communists . . ."

An old man sighed a row back. "The Japanese. *Los Alemanes. ¡Ay de mi!"*

"¡Achicharados!" yelled the barker.

A beerseller came by. Someone past Rhonda stopped him. He passed over a bottle of beer, Rhonda passed the money back, and the change. The person next to her tapped her on the shoulder. He held up an *abrebotella* that was attached by an elastic cord to an Orvis pin-reel on the Hummingbird Foods man's white jacket. She pulled it over to the man with the beer bottle. He opened the cap. Foam went everywhere, and he let go of the bottle opener. It *zeeted* back and thumped the beerseller in the chest.

"¡Mal educado!" said the vendor, glaring and moving on.

The house lights went down. The bell rang.

The wrestlers charged from their cages into the ring. The technical people knocked the cages down in a trice, and one locked each door with a Club®.

By then, no one was watching the maintenance men.

Rhonda tried to keep up with what was going on. Everyone was screaming. The devil-suit wrestler had the Tarzan-guy in some kind of stranglehold. The guy with the globe for a head had the whole head of the guy with the question mark in one big hand. The guy with a face for a mask had both his hands into the chest of the guy with the lightning bolts.

Then it all changed, and everybody had a different hold on everybody else. Punches flew. Feet pounded. Somebody smashed against the cyclone fence. The barbed wire whined. There were screams inside and outside the ring. Sinews cracked. She heard the sound of breathing, from the crowd, the wrestlers, herself. She saw drops of sweat on the canvas, and imagined how hot it was out there.

Then the lights went out again, everywhere but her side of the arena, and the giant shadows sprang up. The three guys who'd come in together looked around a second, which gave their opponents time to jump on their heads again.

"¡Caracoles!" he said. He was an old man now, and the TV was turned up loud so he could hear it.

He watched what was happening.

"I am truly needed," he said to himself. He reached for his cane, pulled himself up, reached the balance point, went backward into the chair again.

Then he swung up and stood, pushing with his cane to keep from going too far forward.

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"¡Ay de mi!" He started toward the closet in the back room.

He had not wrestled in more than thirty years. He had not even played himself in the movies for twenty-five. He had watched a series of younger, stronger men wrestle under his name, and people who could actually act play him in the films. When they'd had the huge going-away party for him when he left the sport, it was an actor up there getting all the silver watches and memberships in country clubs.

He tried to keep an eye on the TV from the back room. He opened the closet door with a key. He looked over the rows of silver masks and tights, the cloaks and capes. When he had put them aside, and moved to this retirement community, no one had known.

He reached for one of his special masks. He was more than two hundred kilometers away. He would have to call his Air Force general friend, get a jet, parachute into the Arena Tomalin through the skylight, just as he had done in the old days.

His cane caught on a pair of tights and he fell forward, smashing his head against the back of the closet. He came up bleeding, silver sequins and rhinestones stuck on his gashed forehead. He pressed a pair of tights against the cut, moved back to the living room and his chair.

"¡Uf!" he said. *"¡No tengo energia como lo!"*

He sat in his chair, bloody tights wadded against his balding head, tears running down his face.

On the TV, Carne Xipe had El Hijo de la Selva in the Deltoid Grinder hold.

"I don't understand," yelled El Hijo to Señor Nadie. "We keep knocking them down but they won't—Ouch! Yahh!"

There was a pop of sinews as El Diablo Peligroso grabbed him three or four places.

"We must keep on, amigos," said Señor Nadie. He grabbed El Mundo Grosero where it would do the most good, going from an inside to an outside-stepover-bar-toehold, forgetting for a second that the object was not a fall, but to remove him from the ring.

From somewhere, Carne Xipe stuck a finger in the eyeslit of his mask and poked.

Señor Nadie screamed and caught the hand as he fell. He was dragged toward the side of the ring by two pairs of hands.

Then he saw El Ravo's boots out of his good eye, and the hands let go, and Señor Nadie came up, throwing punches and kidney chops, eye watering.

The big shadow of the devil and the world crossed the lightning.

Then the forest eclipsed the world, and the question mark sailed through the air and took out the masked unmasked shadow.

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With grunts from below, the shadows loomed up and up the far walls.

Somebody screamed, louder than ever, and there was the sound of breaking bone.

They stood panting, El Hijo de la Selva holding his useless left hand. Even his mask was twisted with pain.

The three challengers closed in on them, their strength seemingly renewed. Carne Xipe had his arms out to the sides, ready to reapply the Pectoral Scorpion. El Diablo Peligroso moved sideways back and forth, waiting for his chance to get into the Monterrey Crab. El Mundo Grosero had his right arm out, head high, wanting one of the champions to walk into the Japanese sleephold.

Closer and closer they came.

"We must persevere," said Señor Nadie, barely able to keep his breath going. "We must fight the best fight of our lives, cleanly and—"

A woman was screaming above all the other noise in the darkened arena.

"¡Desvestidos las máscaras!" she shrieked.

The wrestlers did not know to whom she was yelling.

Then in English: "Take off their masks!"

The noise in the sportatorium went way down.

"Rip off their masks, you namby-pamby jerks!" she yelled through the silence.

The champions looked at each other, then charged in.

Rhonda looked around her. For a second, everyone in the Arena Tomalin looked back. Then their heads turned away as the wrestlers collided.

She sat back down.

El Hijo de La Selva pulled with his good hand at the barely moving head of Carne Xipe. The mask of the mask of a face came loose, like pulling off a second skin. El Hijo jerked back—underneath was the same face as on the mask. Then he pulled the mask completely off, and the body quit struggling.

There was a river beyond the darkness, leading toward a place that was light. A dog stood on the bank of the river, barking, jumping back and forth. He stepped into the water, and the dog ran in a splashing circle around him, then began to swim, looking back over its shoulder, barking encouragement.

He swam toward the light, following the dog, familiar yet not the same as before.

Then they were on the other side in the light.

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* * *

El Ravo Tepextehualtepec swung El Diablo Peligroso around and around by the horns, faster and faster, keeping a turning point on the Club® in the enemy corner. The mask began to loosen as El Diablo pulled a couple of g's. Then the mask came over the chin, ripping cartilage from his nose, blood flying, and he sailed through the air into the corner post like a sack of cement.

The nun pointed to the block of granite as big as Mount Everest. And he saw far up it the tiny hummingbird brushing the edge of the block with its wings.

A small polished groove encircled the block.

He sighed. He was at a kind of peace. He was getting exactly what he deserved.

Señor Nadie sat on the heaving chest of El Mundo Grosero. There was nothing left for El Mundo to do, and not much to do it with. Señor Nadie heard the cheering as El Ravo and El Hijo finished their work.

He leaned down very close to the Indian Ocean where the mouth was; it twisted away, revealing the Australian and Pacific ear.

Señor Nadie grabbed the whole Eastern Hemisphere with his large hand. He leaned down close to the ear and pulled.

"Caducidad," he said as he did.

He rushed northwest through the air, swooped over mountains, came down close to the fields, zoomed faster, went past a town out to a shack in the Salinas Valley, went down to the ground, through the door, across the room, and up between a woman's legs.

And came right back out again.

"A girl," said the midwife.

They were going to name her Elena Esperanza por América Rodriguez when it came time for the christening, and they were going to raise her to have it better than they had, and get a good education, and become a doctor or a teacher or an astronaut.

Wait, he wanted to say, there has been some mistake. I'm not a girl, I'm a grown man. I'm not being born to a poor illegal family in California, I'm a rich man living in Mexico City. I'm not even really a wrestler, I'm an arbitrageur, an executive. I have more platinum cards than other people my age have hemorrhoids. I am feared in my field. I can destroy people's lives, close down whole towns with a memo. There has been some mistake. I will make a few phone calls and clear all this up. *That* was what he meant to say.

What he said was:

"WAAAAAAAAAHHHHHH!"

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19.

Rhonda went by the painted-over wall on her way to classes. She came even with the furniture and appliance store in the early morning, and saw the little dapper man was finishing a new display, this time of those tiny model beds that would be perfect in a three-year-old's palace.

He saw her, brightened, indicated his wares, reached back through the small door and took out a placard and put it on the easel:

Now the world, awake so long,
Can find easeful slumber.

She smiled. He smiled, then climbed through the door and was gone.

Rhonda walked on, and again the blue and white Ford Galaxie went by.

Only this time, the wrestlers had on their question mark, lightning bolt, and camouflage masks, but were wearing jeans and T-shirts, except the older one driving, who wore a bush jacket over his T-shirt. They turned out of sight down toward the *colegio menor*.

Señor Nadie was on his way to his woodworking class. El Ravo Tepe was taking electronics. And El Hijo de la Selva was enrolled in gardening. ●

—For Fred Duarte and Karen Meschke, and Miguel Ramos; John D.Berry who came up with exactly *the right word at* exactly *the right time, and Pat Cadigan who knew it had to be a* junior *college.—HW*

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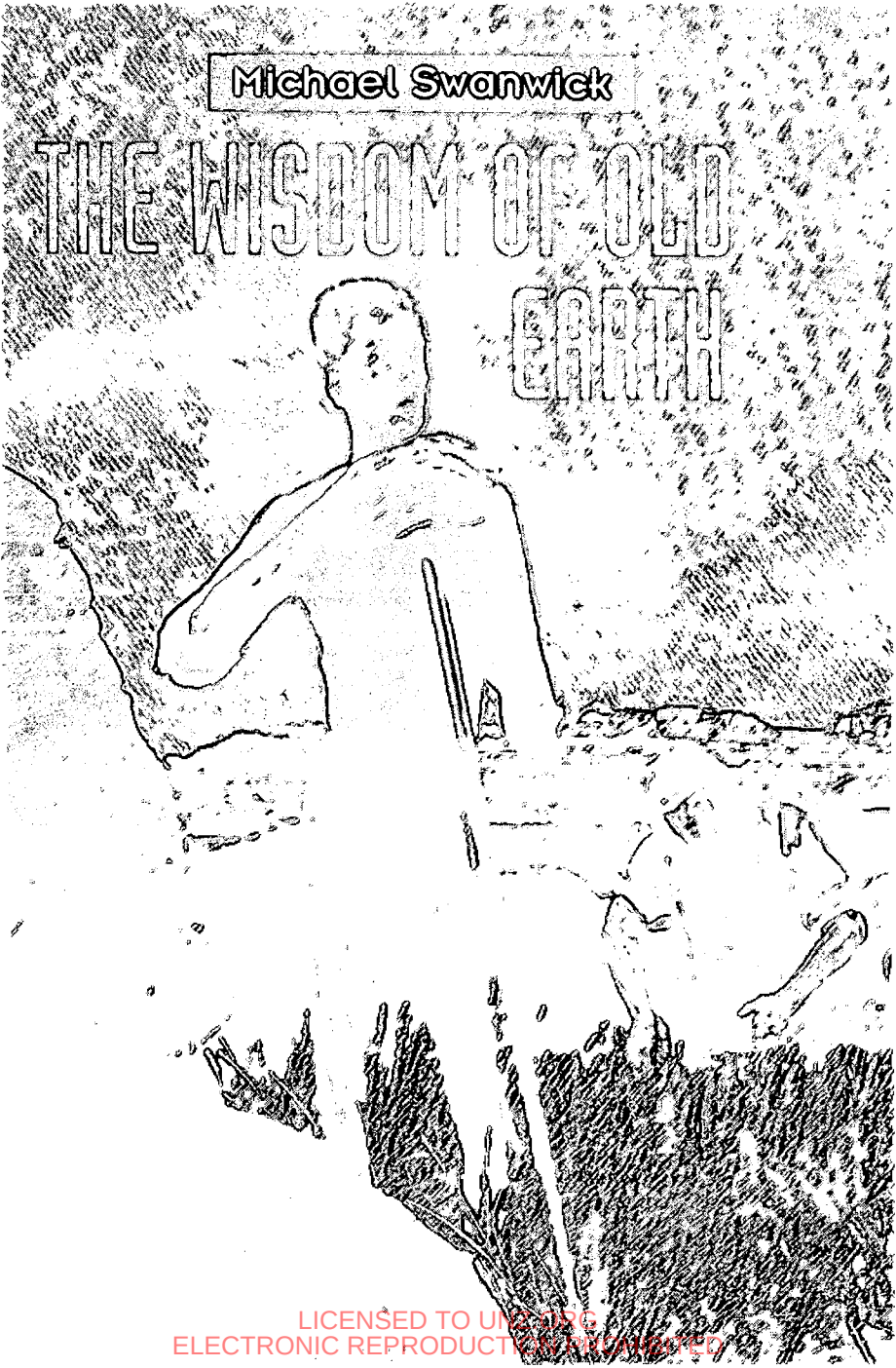
Michael Swanwick

THE WISDOM OF OLD EARTH



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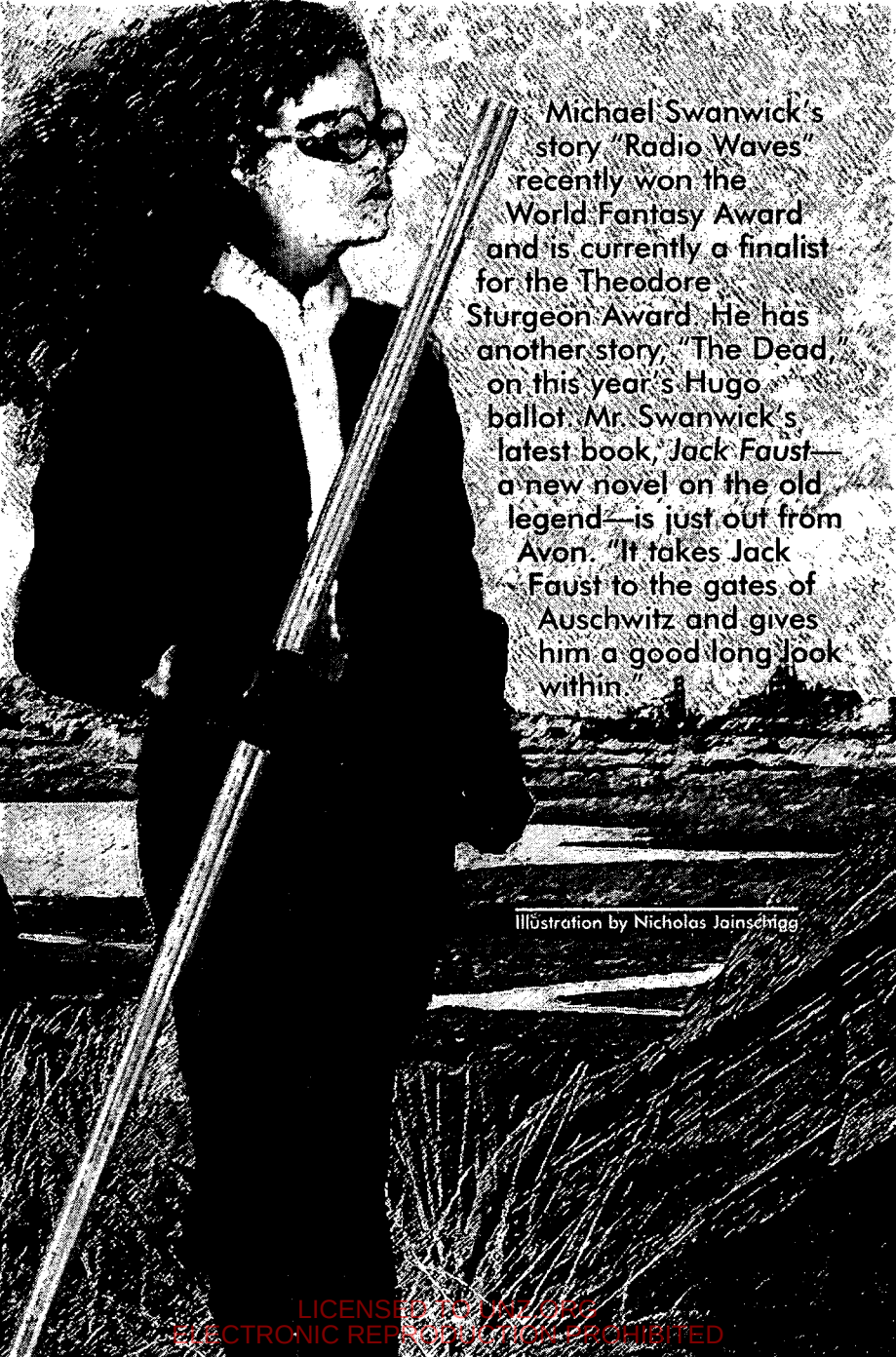

Michael Swanwick's story "Radio Waves" recently won the World Fantasy Award and is currently a finalist for the Theodore Sturgeon Award. He has another story, "The Dead," on this year's Hugo ballot. Mr. Swanwick's latest book, *Jack Faust*—a new novel on the old legend—is just out from Avon. "It takes Jack Faust to the gates of Auschwitz and gives him a good long look within."

Illustration by Nicholas Jainschigg

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Judith Seize-the-Day was, quite simply, the best of her kind. Many another had aspired to the clarity of posthuman thought, and several might claim some rude mastery of its essentials, but she alone came to understand it as completely as any offworlder.

Such understanding did not come easily. The human mind is slow to generalize and even slower to integrate. It lacks the quicksilver apprehension of the posthuman. The simplest truth must be repeated often to imprint even the most primitive understanding of what comes naturally and without effort to the space-faring children of humanity. Judith had grown up in Pole Star City, where the shuttles slant down through the zone of permanent depletion in order to avoid further damage to the fragile ozone layer, and thus from childhood had associated extensively with the highly evolved. It was only natural that as a woman she would elect to turn her back on her own brutish kind and strive to bootstrap herself into a higher order.

Yet even then she was like an ape trying to pass as a philosopher. For all her laborious ponderings, she did not yet comprehend the core wisdom of posthumanity, which was that thought and action must be as one. Being a human, however, when she did comprehend, she understood it more deeply and thoroughly than the posthumans themselves. As a Canadian, she could tap into the ancient and chthonic wisdoms of her race. Where her thought went, the civilized mind could not follow.

It would be expecting too much of such a woman that she would entirely hide her contempt for her own kind. She cursed the two trollish Ninglanders who were sweating and chopping a way through the lush tangles of kudzu, and drove them onward with the lash of her tongue.

"Unevolved bastard pigs!" she spat. "Inbred degenerates! If you ever want to get home to molest your dogs and baby sisters again, you'll put your backs into it!"

The larger of the creatures looked back at her with an angry gleam in his eye, and his knuckles whitened on the hilt of his machete. She only grinned humorlessly, and patted the holster of her *ankh*. Such weapons were rarely allowed humans. Her possession of it was a mark of the great respect in which she was held.

The brute returned to his labor.

It was deepest winter, and the jungle tracts of what had once been the mid-Atlantic coastlands were traversable. Traversable, that is, if one had a good guide. Judith was among the best. She had brought her party alive to the Flying Hills of southern Pennsylvania, and not many could have done that. Her client had come in search of the fabled bell of liberty, which many another party had sought in vain. She did not believe he would find it either. But that did not concern her.

All that concerned her was their survival.

So she cursed and drove the savage Ninglanders before her, until all at

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once they broke through the vines and brush out of shadow and into a clearing.

All three stood unmoving for an instant, staring out over the clumps and hillocks of grass that covered the foundations of what had once been factories, perhaps, or workers' housing, gasoline distribution stations, grist mills, shopping malls. . . . Even the skyline was uneven. Mystery beckoned from every ambiguous lump.

It was almost noon. They had been walking since sundown.

Judith slipped on her goggles and scanned the grey skies for navigation satellites. She found three radar beacons within range. A utility accepted their input and calculated her position: less than a hundred miles from Philadelphia. They'd made more distance than she'd expected. The empathic function mapped for her the locations of her party: three, including herself, then one, then two, then one, strung over a mile and a half of trail. That was wrong.

Very wrong indeed.

"Pop the tents," she ordered, letting the goggles fall around her neck. "Stay out of the food."

The Ninglanders dropped their packs. One lifted a refrigeration stick over his head like a spear and slammed it into the ground. A wash of cool air swept over them all. His lips curled with pleasure, revealing broken yellow teeth.

She knew that if she lingered, she would not be able to face the oppressive jungle heat again. So, turning, Judith strode back the way she'd come. Rats scattered at her approach, disappearing into hot green shadow.

The first of her party she encountered was Harry Work-to-Death. His face was pale and he shivered uncontrollably. But he kept walking, because to stop was to die. They passed each other without a word. Judith doubted he would live out the trip. He had picked up something after their disastrous spill in the Hudson. There were opiates enough in what survived of the medical kit to put him out of his misery, but she did not make him the offer.

She could not bring herself to.

Half a mile later came Leeza Child-of-Scorn and Maria Triumph-of-the-Will, chattering and laughing together. They stopped when they saw her. Judith raised her *ankh* in the air, and shook it so that they could feel its aura scrape ever so lightly against their nervous systems.

"Where is the offworlder?" The women shrank from her anger. "You abandoned him. You *dared*. Did you think you could get away with it? You were fools if you did!"

Wheedlingly, Leeza said, "The sky man knew he was endangering the rest of us, so he asked to be left behind." She and Maria were full-blooded Canadians, like Judith, free of the taint of Southern genes. They had

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been hired for their intelligence, and intelligence they had—a low sort of animal cunning that made them dangerously unreliable when the going got hard. "He insisted."

"It was very noble of him," Maria said piously.

"I'll give you something to be noble about if you don't turn around and lead me back to where you left him." She holstered her *ankh,* but did not lock it down. "Now!" With blows of her fists, she forced them down the trail. Judith was short, stocky, all muscle. She drove them before her like the curs that they were.

The offworlder lay in the weeds where he had been dropped, one leg twisted at an odd angle. The litter that Judith had lashed together for him had been flung into the bushes.

His clothes were bedraggled, and the netting had pulled away from his collar. But weak as he was, he smiled to see her. "I knew you would return for me." His hands fluttered up in a gesture indicating absolute confidence. "So I was careful to avoid moving. The fracture will have to be reset. But that's well within your capabilities, I'm sure."

"I haven't lost a client yet." Judith unlaced his splint and carefully straightened the leg. Posthumans, spending so much of their time in microgravity environments, were significantly less robust than their ancestral stock. Their bones broke easily. Yet when she reset the femur and tied up the splint again with lengths of nylon cord, he didn't make a sound. His kind had conscious control over their endorphin production. Judith checked his neck for ticks and chiggers, then tucked in his netting. "Be more careful with this. There are a lot of ugly diseases loose out here."

"My immune system is stronger than you'd suspect. If the rest of me were as strong, I wouldn't be holding you back like this."

As a rule, she liked the posthuman women better than their men. The men were hothouse flowers—flighty, elliptical, full of fancies and elaboration. Their beauty was the beauty of a statue; all sculptured features and chill affect. The offworlder, however, was not like that. His look was direct. He was as solid and straightforward as a woman.

"While I was lying here, I almost prayed for a rescue party."

To God, she thought he meant. Then saw how his eyes lifted briefly, involuntarily, to the clouds and the satellites beyond. Much that for humans required machines, a posthuman could accomplish with precisely tailored neural implants.

"They would've turned you down." This Judith knew for a fact. Her mother, Ellen To-the-Manner-Born, had died in the jungles of Wisconsin, eaten away with gangrene and cursing the wardens over an open circuit.

"Yes, of course, one life is nothing compared to the health of the planet." His mouth twisted wryly. "Yet still, I confess I was tempted."

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"Put him back in the litter," she told the women. "Carry him gently." In the Québecois dialect, which she was certain her client did not know, she added, "Do this again, and I'll kill you."

She lagged behind, letting the others advance out of sight, so she could think. In theory she could simply keep the party together. In practice, the women could not both carry the offworlder and keep up with the men. And if she did not stay with the Ninglanders, they would not work. There were only so many days of winter left. Speed was essential.

An unexpected peal of laughter floated back to her, then silence.

Wearily, she trudged on. Already they had forgotten her, and her *ankh*. Almost she could envy them. Her responsibilities weighed heavily upon her. She had not laughed since the Hudson.

According to her goggles, there was a supply cache in Philadelphia. Once there, they could go back on full rations again.

The tents were bright mushrooms in the clearing. Work-to-Death lay dying within one of them. The women had gone off with the men into the bush. Even in this ungodly heat and humidity, they were unable or unwilling to curb their bestial lusts.

Judith sat outside with the offworlder, the refrigeration stick turned up just enough to take the edge off the afternoon heat. To get him talking, she asked, "Why did you come to Earth? There is nothing here worth all your suffering. Were I you, I'd've turned back long ago."

For a long moment, the offworlder struggled to gear down his complex thoughts into terms Judith could comprehend. At last he said, "Consider evolution. Things do not evolve from lower states to higher, as the ancients believed, with their charts that began with a fish crawling up upon the land and progressed on to mammals, apes, Neanderthals, and finally men. Rather, an organism evolves to fit its environment. An ape cannot live in the ocean. A human cannot brachiate. Each thrives in its own niche.

"Now consider posthumanity. Our environment is entirely artificial—floating cities, the Martian subsurface, the Venusian and Jovian bubbles. Such habitats require social integration of a high order. A human could survive within them, possibly, but she would not thrive. Our surround is self-defined, and therefore within it we are the pinnacle of evolution."

As he spoke, his hands twitched with the suppressed urge to amplify and clarify his words with the secondary emotive language offworlders employed in parallel with the spoken. Thinking, of course, that she did not savvy handsign. But as her facility with it was minimal, Judith did not enlighten him.

"Now imagine a being with more-than-human strength and greater-than-posthuman intellect. Such a creature would be at a disadvantage in the posthuman environment. She would be an evolutionary dead end.

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How then could she get any sense of herself, what she could do, and what she could not?"

"How does all apply to you personally?"

"I wanted to find the measure of myself, not as a product of an environment that caters to my strengths and coddles my weaknesses. I wanted to discover what I am in the natural state."

"You won't find the natural state here. We're living in the aftermath."

"No," he agreed. "The natural state is lost, shattered like an eggshell. Even if—when—we finally manage to restore it, gather up all the shards and glue them together, it will no longer be natural, but something we have decided to maintain and preserve, like a garden. It will be only an extension of our culture."

"Nature is dead," Judith said. It was a concept she had picked up from other posthumans.

His teeth flashed with pleasure at her quick apprehension. "Indeed. Even off Earth, where conditions are more extreme, its effects are muted by technology. I suspect that nature can only exist where our all-devouring culture has not yet reached. Still . . . here on Earth, in the regions where all but the simplest technologies are prohibited, and it's still possible to suffer pain and even death. . . . This is as close to an authentic state as can be achieved." He patted the ground by his side. "The past is palpable here, century upon century, and under that the strength of the soil." His hands involuntarily leapt. *This is so difficult,* they said. *This language is so clumsy.* "I am afraid I have not expressed myself very well."

He smiled apologetically then, and she saw how exhausted he was. But still she could not resist asking, "What is it like, to think as you do?" It was a question that she had asked many times, of many posthumans. Many answers had she received, and no two of them alike.

The offworlder's face grew very still. At last he said, "Lao-tzu put it best. 'The way that can be named is not the true way. The name that can be spoken is not the eternal name.' The higher thought is ineffable, a mystery that can be experienced but never explained."

His arms and shoulders moved in a gesture that was the evolved descendant of a shrug. His weariness was palpable.

"You need rest," she said, and, standing, "let me help you into your tent."

"Dearest Judith. What would I ever do without you?"

Ever so slightly, she flushed.

The next sundown, their maps, though recently downloaded, proved to be incomplete. The improbably named Skookle River had wandered, throwing off swamps that her goggles' topographical functions could not distinguish from solid land. For two nights the party struggled southward, moving far to the west and then back again so many times that Judith would have been entirely lost without the navsats.

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Then the rains began.

There was no choice but to leave the offworlder behind. Neither he nor Harry Work-to-Death could travel under such conditions. Judith put Maria and Leeza in charge of them both. After a few choice words of warning, she left them her spare goggles and instructions to break camp and follow as soon as the rains let up.

"Why do you treat us like dogs?" a Ninglander asked her when they were underway again. The rain poured down over his plastic poncho.

"Because you are no better than dogs."

He puffed himself up. "I am large and shapely. I have a fine mustache. I can give you many orgasms."

His comrade was pretending not to listen. But it was obvious to Judith that the two men had a bet going as to whether she could be seduced or not.

"Not without my participation."

Insulted, he thumped his chest. Water droplets flew. "I am as good as any of your Canadian men!"

"Yes," she agreed, "unhappily, that's true."

When the rains finally let up, Judith had just crested a small hillock that her topographics identified as an outlier of the Welsh Mountains. Spread out before her was a broad expanse of overgrown twenty-first-century ruins. She did not bother accessing the city's name. In her experience, all lost cities were alike; she didn't care if she never saw another. "Take ten," she said, and the Ninglanders shrugged out of their packs.

Idly, she donned her goggles to make sure that Leeza and Maria were breaking camp, as they had been instructed to do.

And screamed with rage.

The goggles Judith had left behind had been hung, unused, upon the flap-pole of one of the tents. Though the two women did not know it, it was slaved to hers, and she could spy upon their actions. She kept her goggles on all the way back to their camp.

When she arrived, they were sitting by their refrigeration stick, surrounded by the discarded wrappings of half the party's food and all of its opiates. The stick was turned up so high that the grass about it was white with frost. Already there was an inch of ash at its tip.

Harry Work-to-Death lay on the ground by the women, grinning loopily, face frozen to the stick. Dead.

Outside the circle, only partially visible to the goggles, lay the offworlder, still strapped to his litter. He chuckled and sang to himself. The women had been generous with the drugs.

"Pathetic weakling," Child-of-Scorn said to the offworlder, "I don't know why you didn't drown in the rain. But I am going to leave you out in the heat until you are dead, and then I am going to piss on your corpse."

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"I am not going to wait," Triumph-of-the-Will bragged. She tried to stand and could not. "In just—just a moment!"

The whoops of laughter died as Judith strode into the camp. The Ninglanders stumbled to a halt behind her, and stood looking uncertainly from her to the women and back. In their simple way, they were shocked by what they saw.

Judith went to the offworlder and slapped him hard to get his attention. He gazed up confusedly at the patch she held up before his face.

"This is a detoxifier. It's going to remove those drugs from your system. Unfortunately, as a side effect, it will also depress your endorphin production. I'm afraid this is going to hurt."

She locked it onto his arm, and then said to the Ninglanders, "Take him up the trail. I'll be along."

They obeyed. The offworlder screamed once as the detoxifier took effect, and then fell silent again. Judith turned to the traitors. "You chose to disobey me. Very well. I can use the extra food."

She drew her *ankh*.

Child-of-Scorn clenched her fists angrily. "So could we! Half-rations so your little pet could eat his fill. Work us to death carrying him about. You think I'm *stupid*. I'm not stupid. I know what you want with him."

"He's the client. He pays the bills."

"What are you to him but an ugly little ape? He'd sooner fuck a cow than you!"

Triumph-of-the-Will fell over laughing. "A cow!" she cried. "A fuh-fucking cow! Moo!"

Child-of-Scorn's eyes blazed. "You know what the sky people call the likes of you and me? Mud-women! Sometimes they come to the cribs outside Pole Star City to get good and dirty. But they always wash off and go back to their nice clean habitats afterward. Five minutes after he climbs back into the sky, he'll have forgotten your name."

"Moooo! Moooo!"

"You cannot make me angry," Judith said, "for you are only animals."

"I am not an animal!" Child-of-Scorn shook her fist at Judith. "I refuse to be treated like one."

"One does not blame an animal for being what it is. But neither does one trust an animal that has proved unreliable. You were given two chances."

"If I'm an animal, then what does that make *you*? Huh? What the fuck does that make *you*, goddamnit?" The woman's face was red with rage. Her friend stared blankly up at her from the ground.

"Animals," Judith said through gritted teeth, "should be killed without emotion."

She fired twice.

* * *

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With her party thus diminished, Judith could not hope to return to Canada afoot. But there were abundant ruins nearby, and they were a virtual reservoir of chemical poisons from the days when humans ruled the Earth. If she set the *ankh* to its hottest setting, she could start a blaze that would set off a hundred alarms in Pole Star City. The wardens would have to come to contain it. She would be imprisoned, of course, but her client would live.

Then Judith heard the thunder of engines.

High in the sky, a great light appeared, so bright it was haloed with black. She held up a hand to lessen the intensity and saw within the dazzle a small dark speck. A shuttle, falling from orbit.

She ran crashing through the brush as hard and fast as she could. Nightmarish minutes later, she topped a small rise and found the Ninglanders standing there, the offworlder between them. They were watching the shuttle come to a soft landing in the clearing its thrusters had burned in the vegetation.

"You summoned it," she accused the offworlder.

He looked up with tears in his eyes. The detoxifier had left him in a state of pitiless lucidity, with nothing to concentrate on but his own suffering. "I had to, yes." His voice was distant, his attention turned inward, on the neural device that allowed him to communicate with the ship's crew. "The pain—you can't imagine what it's like. How it feels."

A lifetime of lies roared in Judith's ears. Her mother had died for lack of the aid that came at this man's thought.

"I killed two women just now."

"Did you?" He looked away. "I'm sure you had good reasons. I'll have it listed as death by accident." Without his conscious volition, his hands moved, saying, *It's a trivial matter, let it be.*

A hatch opened in the shuttle's side. Slim figures clambered down, white med-kits on their belts. The offworlder smiled through his tears and stretched out welcoming arms to them.

Judith stepped back and into the shadow of his disregard. She was just another native now.

Two women were dead.

And her reasons for killing them mattered to no one.

She threw her head back and laughed, freely and without reserve. In that instant Judith Seize-the-Day was as fully and completely alive as any of the unworldly folk who walk the airless planets and work in the prosperous and incomprehensible habitats of deep space.

In that instant, had any been looking, she would have seemed not human at all. ●

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Later examination of weather reports and newspapers showed that it may have started as early as October nineteenth, but the first indication I had that something unusual was going on was at Thanksgiving.

I went to Mom's for dinner (as usual), and was feeding cranberries and cut-up oranges into Mom's old-fashioned meat grinder for the cranberry relish and listening to my sister-in-law Allison talk about her Christmas newsletter (also as usual).

"Which of Cheyenne's accomplishments do you think I should write about first, Nan?" she said to me, spreading cheese on celery sticks. "Her playing lead snowflake in *The Nutcracker* or her scoring a goal in Pee-Wee Soccer?"

"I'd list the Nobel Peace Prize first," I murmured, under cover of the crunch of an apple being put in through the grinder.

"There just isn't room to put in all the girls' accomplishments," she said, oblivious. "Mitch *insists* I keep it to one page."

"That's because of Aunt Lydia's newsletters," I said. "Eight pages single-spaced."

"I know," she said. "And in that tiny print you can barely read." She waved a celery stick thoughtfully. "That's an idea."

"Eight pages single-spaced?"

"No. I could get the computer to do a smaller font. That way I'd have room for Dakota's Sunshine Scout merit badges. I got the cutest paper for my newsletters this year. Little angels holding bunches of mistletoe."

Christmas newsletters are *very* big in my family, in case you couldn't tell. Everybody—uncles, grandparents, second cousins, my sister Sueann—sends the Xeroxed monstrosities to family, coworkers, old friends from high school, and people they met on their cruise to the Caribbean (which they wrote about at length in their newsletter the year before.) Even my Aunt Irene, who writes a handwritten letter on every one of her Christmas cards, sticks a newsletter in with it.

My second cousin Lucille's are the worst, although there are a lot of contenders. Last year hers started:

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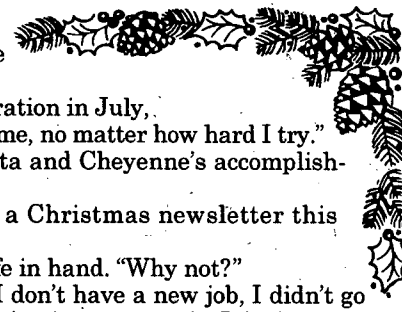

"Another year has hurried past
And, here I am, asking, 'Where did the time go so fast?'
A trip in February, a bladder operation in July,
Too many activities, not enough time, no matter how hard I try."

At least Allison doesn't put Dakota and Cheyenne's accomplishments into verse.

"I don't think I'm going to send a Christmas newsletter this year," I said.

Allison stopped, cheese-filled knife in hand. "Why not?"

"Because I don't have any news. I don't have a new job, I didn't go on a vacation to the Bahamas, I didn't win any awards. I don't have anything to tell."

"Don't be ridiculous," my mother said, sweeping in carrying a foil-covered casserole dish. "Of course you do, Nan. What about that skydiving class you took?"

"That was last year, Mom," I said. And I had only taken it so I'd have something to write about in my Christmas newsletter.

"Well, then, tell about your social life. Have you met anybody lately at work?"

Mom asks me this every Thanksgiving. Also Christmas, the Fourth of July, and every time I see her.

"There's nobody to meet," I said, grinding cranberries. "Nobody new ever gets hired because nobody ever quits. Everybody who works there's been there for years. Nobody even gets fired. Bob Hunziger hasn't been to work on time in eight years, and *he*'s still there."

"What about . . . what was his name?" Allison said, arranging the celery sticks in a cut-glass dish. "The guy you liked who had just gotten divorced?"

"Gary," I said. "He's still hung up on his ex-wife."

"I thought you said she was a real shrew."

"She is," I said. "Marcie the Menace. She calls him twice a week complaining about how unfair the divorce settlement is, even though she got virtually everything. Last week it was the house. She claimed she'd been too upset by the divorce to get the mortgage refinanced and he owed her twenty thousand dollars because now interest rates have gone up. But it doesn't matter. Gary still keeps hoping they'll get back together. He almost didn't fly to Connecticut to his parents' for Thanksgiving because he thought she might change her mind about a reconciliation."

"You could write about Sueann's new boyfriend," Mom said, sticking marshmallows on the sweet potatoes. "She's bringing him today."

This was as usual, too. Sueann always brings a new boyfriend to Thanksgiving dinner. Last year it was a biker. And no, I don't mean one of those nice guys who wears a beard and black Harley T-shirt on week-

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ends and works as an accountant between trips to Sturgis. I mean a Hell's Angel.

My sister Sueann has the worst taste in men of anyone I have ever known. Before the biker, she dated a member of a militia group, and after the ATF arrested him, a bigamist wanted in three states.

"If this boyfriend spits on the floor, I'm leaving," Allison said, counting out silverware. "Have you met him?" she asked Mom.

"No," Mom said, "but Sueann says he used to work where you do, Nan. So *somebody* must quit once in awhile."

I racked my brain, trying to think of any criminal types who'd worked in my building. "What's his name?"

"David something," Mom said, and Cheyenne and Dakota raced into the kitchen, screaming, "Aunt Sueann's here, Aunt Sueann's here! Can we eat now?"

Allison leaned over the sink and pulled the curtains back to look out the window.

"What does he look like?" I asked, sprinkling sugar on the cranberry relish.

"Clean-cut," she said, sounding surprised. "Short blond hair, slacks, white shirt, tie."

Oh, no, that meant he was a neo-Nazi. Or married and planning to get a divorce as soon as the kids graduated from college, which would turn out to be in twenty-three years since he'd just gotten his wife pregnant again.

"Is he handsome?" I asked, sticking a spoon in the cranberry relish.

"No," Allison said, even more surprised. "He's actually kind of ordinary-looking."

I came over to the window to look. He was helping Sueann out of the car. She was dressed up, too, in a dress and a denim slouch hat. "Good heavens," I said. "It's David Carrington. He worked up on fifth in Computing."

"Was he a womanizer?" Allison asked.

"No," I said, bewildered. "He's a very nice guy. He's unmarried, he doesn't drink, he left to go get a degree in medicine."

"Why didn't *you* ever meet him?" Mom said.

David shook hands with Mitch, regaled Cheyenne and Dakota with a knock-knock joke, and told Mom his favorite kind of sweet potatoes were the ones with the marshmallows on top.

"He must be a serial killer," I whispered to Allison.

"Come on, everybody, let's sit down," Mom said. "Cheyenne and Dako-

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ta, you sit here by Grandma. David, you sit here, next to Sueann. Sueann, take off your hat. You know hats aren't allowed at the table."

"Hats for *men* aren't allowed at the table," Sueann said, patting her denim hat. "Women's hats are." She sat down. "Hats are coming back in style, did you know that? *Cosmopolitan*'s latest issue said this is the Year of the Hat."

"I don't care what it is," Mom said. "Your father would never have allowed hats at the table."

"I'll take it off if you'll turn off the TV," Sueann said, complacently opening out her napkin.

They had reached an impasse. Mom always has the TV on during meals. "I like to have it on in case something happens," she said stubbornly.

"Like what?" Mitch said. "Aliens landing from outer space?"

"For your information, there was a UFO sighting two weeks ago. It was on CNN."

"Everything looks delicious," David said. "Is that homemade cranberry relish? I love that. My grandmother used to make it."

He had to be a serial killer.

For half an hour, we concentrated on turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes, green bean casserole, scalloped corn casserole, marshmallow-topped sweet potatoes, cranberry relish, pumpkin pie, and the news on CNN.

"Can't you at least turn it down, Mom?" Mitch said. "We can't even hear to talk."

"I want to see the weather in Washington," Mom said. "For your flight."

"You're leaving tonight?" Sueann said. "But you just got here. I haven't even seen Cheyenne and Dakota."

"Mitch has to fly back tonight," Allison said. "But the girls and I are staying till Wednesday."

"I don't see why you can't stay at least until tomorrow," Mom said.

"Don't tell me this is homemade whipped cream on the pumpkin pie," David said. "I haven't had homemade whipped cream in years."

"You used to work in computers, didn't you?" I asked him. "There's a lot of computer crime around these days, isn't there?"

"Computers!" Allison said. "I forgot all the awards Cheyenne won at computer camp." She turned to Mitch. "The newsletter's going to have to be at least two pages. The girls just have too many awards—T-ball, tadpole swimming, Bible school perfect attendance."

"Do you send Christmas newsletters in your family?" my mother asked David.

He nodded. "I love hearing from everybody."

"You see?" Mom said to me. "People *like* getting newsletters at Christmas."

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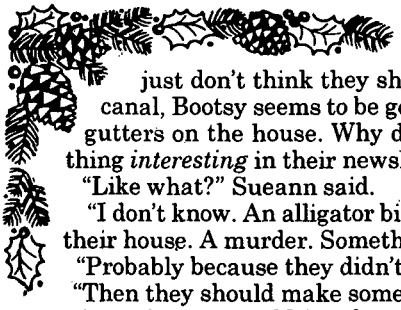

"I don't have anything against Christmas newsletters," I said. "I just don't think they should be deadly dull. Mary had a root canal, Bootsy seems to be getting over her ringworm, we got new gutters on the house. Why doesn't anyone ever write about anything *interesting* in their newsletters?"

"Like what?" Sueann said.

"I don't know. An alligator biting their arm off. A meteor falling on their house. A murder. Something interesting to read."

"Probably because they didn't happen," Sueann said.

"Then they should make something up," I said, "so we don't have to hear about their trip to Nebraska and their gall bladder operation."

"You'd do that?" Allison said, appalled. "You'd make something up?"

"People make things up in their newsletters all the time, and you know it," I said. "Look at the way Aunt Laura and Uncle Phil brag about their vacations and their stock options and their cars. If you're going to lie, they might as well be lies that are interesting for other people to read."

"You have plenty of things to tell without making up lies, Nan," Mom said reprovingly. "Maybe you should do something like your cousin Celia. She writes her newsletter all year long, day by day," she explained to David. "Nan, you might have more news than you think if you kept track of it day by day like Celia. She always has a lot to tell."

Yes, indeed. Her newsletters were nearly as long as Aunt Lydia's. They read like a diary, except she wasn't in junior high, where at least there were pop quizzes and zits and your locker combination to give it a little zing. Celia's newsletters had no zing whatsoever:

"Wed. Jan. 1. Froze to death going out to get the paper. Snow got in the plastic bag thing the paper comes in. Editorial section all wet. Had to dry it out on the radiator. Bran flakes for breakfast. Watched *Good Morning, America.*

"Thurs. Jan. 2. Cleaned closets. Cold and cloudy."

"If you'd write a little every day," Mom said, "you'd be surprised at how much you'd have to tell by Christmas."

Sure. With my life, I wouldn't even have to write it every day. I could do Monday's right now. "Mon. Nov. 28. Froze to death on the way to work. Bob Hunziger not in yet. Penny putting up Christmas decorations. Solveig told me she's sure the baby is going to be a boy. Asked me which name I liked, Albuquerque or Dallas. Said hi to Gary, but he was too depressed to talk to me. Thanksgiving reminds him of ex-wife's giblets. Cold and cloudy."

I was wrong. It was snowing, and Solveig's ultrasound had showed the baby was a girl. "What do you think of Trinidad as a name?" she asked

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me. Penny wasn't putting up Christmas decorations, either. She was passing out slips of paper with our Secret Santas' names on them. "The decorations aren't here yet," she said excitedly. "I'm getting something special from a farmer upstate."

"Does it involve feathers?" I asked her. Last year the decorations had been angels with thousands of chicken feathers glued onto cardboard for their wings. We were still picking them out of our computers.

"No," she said happily. "It's a surprise. I love Christmas; don't you?"

"Is Hunziger in?" I asked her, brushing snow out of my hair. Hats always mash my hair, so I hadn't worn one.

"Are you kidding?" she said. She handed me a Secret Santa slip. "It's the Monday after Thanksgiving. He probably won't be in till sometime Wednesday."

Gary came in, his ears bright red from the cold and a harried expression on his face. His ex-wife must not have wanted a reconciliation.

"Hi, Gary," I said, and turned to hang up my coat without waiting for him to answer.

And he didn't, but when I turned back around, he was still standing there, staring at me. I put a hand up to my hair, wishing I'd worn a hat.

"Can I talk to you a minute?" he said, looking anxiously at Penny.

"Sure," I said, trying not to get my hopes up. He probably wanted to ask me something about the Secret Santas.

He leaned farther over my desk. "Did anything unusual happen to you over Thanksgiving?"

"My sister didn't bring home a biker to Thanksgiving dinner," I said.

He waved that away dismissively. "No, I mean anything odd, peculiar, out of the ordinary."

"That *is* out of the ordinary."

He leaned even closer. "I flew out to my parents' for Thanksgiving, and on the flight home—you know how people always carry on luggage that won't fit in the overhead compartments and then try to cram it in?"

"Yes," I said, thinking of a bridesmaid's bouquet I had made the mistake of putting in the overhead compartment one time.

"Well, nobody did that on my flight. They didn't carry on hanging bags or enormous shopping bags full of Christmas presents. Some people didn't even have a carry-on. And that isn't all. Our flight was half an hour late, and the flight attendant said, 'Those of you who do not have connecting flights, please remain seated until those with connections have deplaned.' And they did." He looked at me expectantly.

"Maybe everybody was just in the Christmas spirit."

He shook his head. "All four babies on the flight slept the whole way,

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and the toddler behind me didn't kick the seat."

That *was* unusual.

"Not only that, the guy next to me was reading *The Way of All Flesh,* by Samuel Butler. When's the last time you saw anybody on an airplane reading anything but John Grisham or Danielle Steele? I tell you, there's something funny going on."

"What?" I asked curiously.

"I don't know," he said. "You're sure you haven't noticed anything?"

"Nothing except for my sister. She always dates these losers, but the guy she brought to Thanksgiving was really nice. He even helped with the dishes."

"You didn't notice anything else?"

"No," I said, wishing I had. This was the longest he'd ever talked to me about anything besides his ex-wife. "Maybe it's something in the air at the airport. I have to take my sister-in-law and her little girls to the airport Wednesday. I'll keep an eye out."

He nodded. "Don't say anything about this, okay?" he said and hurried off to Accounting.

"What was that all about?" Penny asked, coming over.

"His ex-wife," I said. "When do we have to exchange Secret Santa gifts?"

"Every Friday, and Christmas Eve."

I opened up my slip. Good, I'd gotten Hunziger. With luck I wouldn't have to buy any Secret Santa gifts at all.

Tuesday I got Aunt Laura and Uncle Phil's Christmas newsletter. It was in gold ink on cream-colored paper, with large gold bells in the corners. "Joyeux Noel," it began. "That's French for Merry Christmas. We're sending our newsletter out early this year because we're spending Christmas in Cannes to celebrate John's promotion to assistant CEO and my wonderful new career! Yes, I'm starting my own business—Laura's Floral Creations—and orders are pouring in! It's already been written up in *House Beautiful,* and you will *never* guess who called last week? Martha Stewart!" Et cetera.

I didn't see Gary. Or anything unusual, although the waiter who took my lunch order actually got it right for a change. But he got Tonya's (who works up on third) wrong.

"I *told* him tomato and lettuce only," she said, picking pickles off her sandwich. "I heard Gary talked to you yesterday. Did he ask you out?"

"What's that?" I said, pointing to the folder Tonya'd brought with her to change the subject. "The Harbrace file?"

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"No," she said. "Do you want my pickles? It's our Christmas schedule. *Never* marry anybody who has kids from a previous marriage. Especially when *you* have kids from a previous marriage. Tom's ex-wife Janine, my ex-husband John, and four sets of grandparents all want the kids, and they all want them on Christmas morning. It's like trying to schedule the D-Day invasion."

"At least your husband isn't still hung up on his ex-wife," I said glumly.

"So Gary didn't ask you out, huh?" She bit into her sandwich, frowned, and extracted another pickle. "I'm sure he will. Okay, if we take the kids to Tom's parents at four on Christmas Eve, Janine could pick them up at eight. . . . No, that won't work." She switched her sandwich to her other hand and began erasing. "Janine's not speaking to Tom's parents."

She sighed. "At least John's being reasonable. He called yesterday and said he'd be willing to wait till New Year's to have the kids. I don't know what got into him."

When I got back to work, there was a folded copy of the morning newspaper on my desk.

I opened it up. The headline read, "City Hall Christmas Display to Be Turned On," which wasn't unusual. And neither was tomorrow's headline, which would be, "City Hall Christmas Display Protested."

Either the Freedom Against Faith people protest the nativity scene or the fundamentalists protest the elves or the environmental people protest cutting down Christmas trees or all of them protest the whole thing. It happens every year.

I turned to the inside pages. Several articles were circled in red, and there was a note next to them which read, "See what I mean? Gary."

I looked at the circled articles. "Christmas Shoplifting Down," the first one read. "Mall stores report incidences of shoplifting are down for the first week of the Christmas season. Usually prevalent this time of—"

"What are you doing?" Penny said, looking over my shoulder.

I shut the paper with a rustle. "Nothing," I said. I folded it back up and stuck it in a drawer. "Did you need something?"

"Here," she said, handing me a slip of paper.

"I already got my Secret Santa name," I said.

"This is for Holiday Goodies," she said. "Everybody takes turns bringing in coffee cake or tarts or cake."

I opened up my slip. It read, "Friday Dec. 20. Four dozen cookies."

"I saw you and Gary talking yesterday," Penny said. "What about?"

"His ex-wife," I said. "What kind of cookies do you want me to bring?"

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"Chocolate chip," she said. "Everybody loves chocolate."

As soon as she was gone, I got the newspaper out again and took it into Hunziger's office to read. "Legislature Passes Balanced Budget," the other articles read. "Escaped Convict Turns Self In," "Christmas Food Bank Donations Up."

I read through them and then threw the paper in the wastebasket. Halfway out the door I thought better of it and took it out, folded it up, and carried it back to my desk with me.

While I was putting it in my purse, Hunziger wandered in. "If anybody asks where I am, tell them I'm in the men's room," he said, and wandered out again.

Wednesday afternoon I took the girls and Allison to the airport. She was still fretting over her newsletter.

"Do you think a greeting is absolutely necessary?" she said in the baggage check-in line. "You know, like, 'Dear Friends and Family'?"

"Probably not," I said absently. I was watching the people in line ahead of us, trying to spot this unusual behavior Gary had talked about, but so far I hadn't seen any. People were looking at their watches and complaining about the length of the line, the ticket agents were calling, "Next! *Next!*" to the person at the head of the line, who after standing impatiently in line for forty-five minutes waiting for this moment was now staring blankly into space, and an unattended toddler was methodically pulling the elastic strings off a stack of luggage tags.

"They'll still know it's a Christmas newsletter, won't they?" Allison said. "Even without a greeting at the beginning of it?"

With a border of angels holding bunches of mistletoe, what else could it be? I thought.

"*Next!*" the ticket agent shouted.

The man in front of us had forgotten his photo ID, the girl in front of us in line for the security check was wearing heavy metal, and on the train out to the concourse a woman stepped on my foot and then glared at me as if it were my fault. Apparently all the nice people had traveled the day Gary came home.

And that was probably what it was—some kind of statistical clump where all the considerate, intelligent people had ended up on the same flight.

I knew they existed. My sister Sueann had had an insurance actuary for a boyfriend once (he was also an embezzler, which is why Sueann was dating him) and he had said events weren't evenly distributed, that there were peaks and valleys. Gary must just have hit a peak.

Which was too bad, I thought, lugging Cheyenne, who had demanded

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to be carried the minute we got off the train, down the concourse. Because the only reason he had approached me was because he thought there was something strange going on.

"Here's Gate 55," Allison said, setting Dakota down and getting out French language tapes for the girls. "If I left off the 'Dear Friends and Family,' I'd have room to include Dakota's violin recital. She played 'The Gypsy Dance.'"

She settled the girls in adjoining chairs and put on their headphones. "But Mitch says it's a letter, so it has to have a greeting."

"What if you used something short?" I said. "Like 'Greetings' or something. Then you'd have room to start the letter on the same line."

"Not 'Greetings.'" She made a face. "Uncle Frank started his letter that way last year, and it scared me half to death. I thought Mitch had been *drafted*."

I'd been alarmed, too, but at least it had given me a temporary rush of adrenaline, which was more than Uncle Frank's letters usually did, concerned as they were with prostate problems and disputes over property taxes.

"I suppose I could use 'Holiday Greetings,'" Allison said. "Or 'Christmas Greetings,' but that's almost as long as 'Dear Friends and Family.' If only there were something shorter."

"How about 'hi'?"

"That might work." She got out paper and a pen and started writing. "How do you spell outstanding?"

"O-u-t-s-t-a-n-d-i-n-g," I said absently. I was watching the moving sidewalks in the middle of the concourse. People were standing on the right, like they were supposed to, and walking on the left. No one was standing four abreast or blocking the entire sidewalk with their luggage. No kids were running in the opposite direction of the sidewalk's movement, screaming and running their hands along the rubber railing.

"How do you spell fabulous?" Allison asked.

"Flight 722 to Spokane is now ready for boarding," the flight attendant at the desk said. "Those passengers traveling with small children or those who require additional time for boarding may now board."

A single old lady with a walker stood up and got in line. Allison unhooked the girls' headphones, and we began the ritual of hugging and gathering up belongings.

"We'll see you at Christmas," she said.

"Good luck with your newsletter," I said, handing Dakota her teddy bear, "and don't worry about the heading. It doesn't need one."

They started down the passageway. I stood there, waving, till they were out of sight, and then turned to go.

"We are now ready for regular boarding of rows 25 through 33," the

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flight attendant said, and everybody in the gate area stood up. Nothing unusual here, I thought, and started for the concourse.

"What rows did she call?" a woman in a red beret asked a teenaged boy.

"25 through 33," he said.

"Oh, I'm Row 14," the woman said, and sat back down.

So did I.

"We are now ready to board rows 15 through 24," the flight attendant said, and a dozen people looked carefully at their tickets and then stepped back from the door, patiently waiting their turn. One of them pulled a paperback out of her tote bag and began to read. It was *Kidnapped,* by Robert Louis Stevenson. Only when the flight attendant said, "We are now boarding all rows," did the rest of them stand up and get in line.

Which didn't prove anything, and neither did the standing on the right of the moving sidewalk. Maybe people were just being nice because it was Christmas.

Don't be ridiculous, I told myself. People aren't nicer at Christmas. They're ruder and pushier and crabbier than ever. You've seen them at the mall, and in line for the post office. They act worse at Christmas than any other time.

"This is your final boarding call for Flight 722 to Spokane," the flight attendant said to the empty waiting area. She called to me, "Are you flying to Spokane, ma'am?"

"No." I stood up. "I was seeing friends off."

"I just wanted to make sure you didn't miss your flight," she said, and turned to shut the door.

I started for the moving sidewalk, and nearly collided with a young man running for the gate. He raced up to the desk and flung his ticket down.

"I'm sorry, sir," the flight attendant said, leaning slightly away from the young man as if expecting an explosion. "Your flight has already left. I'm really terribly sor—"

"Oh, it's okay," he said. "It serves me right. I didn't allow enough time for parking and everything, that's all. I should have started for the airport earlier."

The flight attendant was tapping busily on the computer. "I'm afraid the only other open flight to Spokane for today isn't until eight-oh-five this evening."

"Oh, well," he said, smiling. "It'll give me a chance to catch up on my reading." He reached down into his attaché case and pulled out a paperback. It was W. Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage.*

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"Well?" Gary said as soon as I got to work on Thursday morning. He was standing by my desk, waiting for me.

"There's definitely something going on," I said, and told him about the moving sidewalks and the guy who'd missed his plane. "But what?"

"Is there somewhere we can talk?" he said, looking anxiously around.

"Hunziger's office," I said, "but I don't know if he's in yet."

"He's not," he said, led me into the office, and shut the door behind him.

"Sit down," he said, indicating Hunziger's chair. "Now, I know this is going to sound crazy, but I think all these people have been possessed by some kind of alien intelligence. Have you ever seen *Invasion of the Body Snatchers?*"

"What?" I said.

"*Invasion of the Body Snatchers,*" he said. "It's about these parasites from outer space who take over people's bodies and—"

"I *know* what it's about," I said, "and it's *science fiction.* You think the man who missed his plane was some kind of pod-person? You're right," I said, reaching for the doorknob. "I do think you're crazy."

"That's what Donald Sutherland said in *Leechmen from Mars.* Nobody ever believes it's happening, until it's too late."

He pulled a folded newspaper out of his back pocket. "Look at this," he said, waving it in front of me. "Holiday credit card fraud down 20 percent. Holiday suicides down 30 percent. Charitable giving up *60* percent."

"They're coincidences." I explained about the statistical peaks and valleys. "Look," I said, taking the paper from him and turning to the front page. "People Against Cruelty to Our Furry Friends Protests City Hall Christmas Display. Animal Rights Group Objects to Exploitation of Reindeer."

"What about your sister?" he said. "You said she only dates losers. Why would she suddenly start dating a nice guy? Why would an escaped convict suddenly turn himself in? Why would people suddenly start reading the classics? Because they've been taken over."

"By aliens from outer space?" I said incredulously.

"Did he have a hat?"

"Who?" I said, wondering if he really was crazy. Could his being hung-up on his horrible ex-wife have finally made him crack?

"The man who missed his plane," he said. "Was he wearing a hat?"

"I don't remember," I said, and felt suddenly cold. Sueann had worn a hat to Thanksgiving dinner. She'd refused to take it off at the table. And the woman whose ticket said Row 14 had been wearing a beret.

"What do hats have to do with it?" I asked.

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"The man on the plane next to me was wearing a hat. So were most of the other people on the flight. Did you ever see *The Puppet Masters?* The parasites attached themselves to the spinal cord and took over the nervous system," he said. "This morning here at work I counted nineteen people wearing hats. Les Sawtelle, Rodney Jones, Jim Bridgeman—"

"Jim Bridgeman always wears a hat," I said. "It's to hide his bald spot. Besides, he's a computer hacker. All the computer people wear baseball caps."

"DeeDee Crawford," he said. "Vera McDermott, Janet Hall—"

"Women's hats are supposed to be making a comeback," I said.

"George Frazelli, the entire Documentation section—"

"I'm sure there's a logical explanation," I said. "It's been freezing in here all week. There's probably something wrong with the heating system."

"The thermostat's turned down to fifty," he said, "which is something else peculiar. The thermostat's been turned down on all floors."

"Well, that's probably Management. You know how they're always trying to cut costs—"

"They're giving us a Christmas bonus. And they fired Hunziger."

"They fired Hunziger?" I said. Management never fires anybody.

"This morning. That's how I knew he wouldn't be in his office."

"They actually fired Hunziger?"

"And one of the janitors. The one who drank. How do you explain that?"

"I-I don't know," I stammered. "But there has to be some other explanation than aliens. Maybe they took a management course or got the Christmas spirit or their therapists told them to do good deeds or something. Something besides leechmen. Aliens coming from outer space and taking over our brains is impossible!"

"That's what Dana Wynters said in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. But it's not impossible. It's happening right here, and we've got to stop it before they take over everybody and we're the only ones left. They—"

There was a knock on the door. "Sorry to bother you, Gary," Carol Zaliski said, leaning in the door, "but you've got an urgent phone call. It's your ex-wife."

"Coming," he said, looking at me. "Think about what I said, okay?" He went out.

I stood looking after him and frowning.

"What was that all about?" Carol said, coming into the office. She was wearing a white fur hat.

"He wanted to know what to buy his Secret Santa person," I said.

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Friday Gary wasn't there. "He had to go talk to his ex-wife this morning," Tonya told me at lunch, picking pickles off her sandwich. "He'll be back this afternoon. Marcie's demanding he pay for her therapy. She's seeing this psychiatrist, and she claims Gary's the one who made her crazy, so he should pick up the bill for her Prozac. *Why* is he still hung up on her?"

"I don't know," I said, scraping mustard off my burger.

"Carol Zaliski said the two of you were talking in Hunziger's office yesterday. What about? Did he ask you out? Nan?"

I had been staring at her hatless head. "No," I said. "Tonya, has Gary talked to you since Thanksgiving? Did he ask you about whether you'd noticed anything unusual happening?"

"He asked me if I'd noticed anything bizarre or abnormal about my family. I told him, in my family bizarre *is* normal. You won't believe what's happened now. Tom's parents are getting a divorce, which means five sets of parents. Why couldn't they have waited till after Christmas to do this? It's throwing my whole schedule off."

She bit into her sandwich. "I'm sure Gary's going to ask you out. He's probably just working up to it."

If he was, he had the strangest line I'd ever heard. Aliens from outer space. Hiding under hats!

Though, now that he'd mentioned it, there were an awful lot of people wearing hats. Nearly all the men in Data Analysis had baseball caps on, Jerrilyn Wells was wearing a wool stocking cap, and Ms. Jacobson's secretary looked like she was dressed for a wedding in a white thing with a veil. But Sueann had said this was the Year of the Hat.

Sueann, who only dated gigolos and Mafia dons. But she had been bound to hit a nice boyfriend sooner or later, she dated so many guys.

And there weren't any signs of alien possession when I tried to get somebody in the steno pool to make some copies for me. "We're *busy*," Paula Grandy snapped. "It's Christmas, you know!"

I went back to my desk, feeling better. There was an enormous dish made of pine cones on it, filled with candy canes and red and green foil-wrapped chocolate kisses. "Is this part of the Christmas decorations?" I asked Penny.

"No. They aren't ready yet," she said. "This is just a little something to brighten the holidays. I made one for everyone's desk."

I felt even better. I pushed the dish over to one side and started through my mail. There was a green envelope from Allison and Mitch. She must have mailed her newsletters as soon as she got off the plane. I wonder if she decided to forego the heading or Dakota's Most Improved Practicing Piano Award, I thought, slicing it open with the letter opener.

"Dear Nan," it began, several spaces down from the angels-and-mistle-

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toe border. "Nothing much new this year. We're all okay, though Mitch is worried about downsizing, and I always seem to be running from behind. The girls are growing like weeds and doing okay in school, though Cheyenne's been having some problems with her reading and Dakota's still wetting the bed. Mitch and I decided we've been pushing them too hard, and we're working on trying not to overschedule them for activities and just letting them be normal, average little girls."

I jammed the letter back in the envelope and ran up to fourth to look for Gary.

"All right," I said when I found him. "I believe you. What do we do now?"

We rented movies. Actually, we only rented some of the movies. *Attack of the Soul-Killers* and *Invasion from Betelgeuse* were both checked out.

"Which means somebody else has figured it out, too," Gary said. "If only we knew who."

"We could ask the clerk," I suggested.

He shook his head violently. "We can't do anything to make them suspicious. For all we know, they may have taken them off the shelves themselves, in which case we're on the right track. What else shall we rent?"

"What?" I said blankly.

"So it won't look like we're just renting alien invasion movies."

"Oh," I said, and picked up *Ordinary People* and a black and white version of *A Christmas Carol.*

It didn't work. "*The Puppet Masters,*" the kid at the rental desk, wearing a blue-and-yellow Blockbuster hat, said inquiringly. "Is that a good movie?"

"I haven't seen it," Gary said nervously.

"We're renting it because it has Donald Sutherland in it," I said. "We're having a Donald Sutherland film festival. *The Puppet Masters, Ordinary People, Invasion of the Body Snatchers—*"

"Is Donald Sutherland in this?" he asked, holding up *A Christmas Carol.*

"He plays Tiny Tim," I said. "It was his first screen appearance."

"You were great in there," Gary said, leading me down to the other end of the mall to Suncoast to buy *Attack of the Soul Killers.* "You're a very good liar."

"Thanks," I said, pulling my coat closer and looking around the mall. It was freezing in here, and there were hats everywhere, on people and in

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window displays, Panamas and porkpies and picture hats.

"We're surrounded. Look at that," he said, nodding in the direction of Santa Claus's North Pole.

"Santa Claus has always worn a hat," I said.

"I meant the line," he said.

He was right. The kids in line were waiting patiently, cheerfully. Not a single one was screaming or announcing she had to go to the bathroom. "I want a Masters of Earth," a little boy in a felt beanie was saying eagerly to his mother.

"Well, we'll ask Santa," the mother said, "but he may not be able to get it for you. All the stores are sold out."

"Okay," he said. "Then I want a wagon."

Suncoast was sold out of *Attack of the Soul Killers,* but we bought *Invasion from Betelgeuse* and *Infiltrators from Space* and went back to Gary's apartment to screen them.

"Well?" he said after we'd watched three of them. "Did you notice how the aliens start slowly and then spread through the population?"

Actually, what I'd noticed was how dumb all the people in these movies were. "The brain-suckers attack when we're asleep," the hero would say, and promptly lie down for a nap. Or the hero's girlfriend would say, "They're onto us. We've got to get out of here. Right now," and then go back to her apartment to pack.

And, just like in every horror movie, they were always splitting up instead of sticking together. And going down dark alleys. They deserved to be turned into pod-people.

"Our first order of business is to pool what we know about the aliens," Gary said. "It's obvious the purpose of the hats is to conceal the parasites' presence from those who haven't been taken over yet," he said, "and that they're attached to the brain."

"Or the spinal column," I said, "like in *The Puppet Masters.*"

He shook his head. "If that were the case, they could attach themselves to the neck or the back, which would be much less conspicuous. Why would they take the risk of wearing hats, which are so noticeable, if they aren't attached to the top of the head?"

"Maybe the hats serve some other purpose."

The phone rang.

"Yes?" Gary answered it. His face lit up and then fell.

His ex-wife, I thought, and started watching *Infiltrators from Space.*

"You've got to believe me," the hero's girlfriend said to the psychiatrist. "There are aliens here among us. They look just like you or me. You have to believe me."

"I do believe you," the psychiatrist said, and raised his finger to point at her. "Ahhhggghhh!" he screeched, his eyes glowing bright green.

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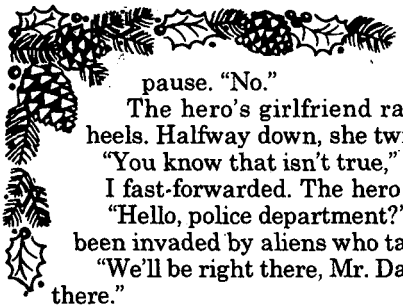

"Marcie . . ." Gary said. There was a long pause. "A friend." Longer pause. "No."

The hero's girlfriend ran down a dark alley, wearing high heels. Halfway down, she twisted her ankle and fell down.

"You know that isn't true," Gary said.

I fast-forwarded. The hero was in his apartment, on the phone.

"Hello, police department?" he said. "You have to help me. We've been invaded by aliens who take over your body!"

"We'll be right there, Mr. Daly," the voice on the phone said. "Stay there."

"How do you know my name?" the hero shouted. "I didn't tell you my address."

"We're on our way," the voice said.

"We'll talk about it tomorrow," Gary said and hung up.

"Sorry," he said, coming over to the couch. "Okay, I downloaded a bunch of stuff about parasites and aliens from the Internet," he handed me a sheaf of stapled papers. "We need to discover what it is they're doing to the people they take over, what their weaknesses are, and how we can fight them. We need to know when and where it started," Gary went on, "how and where it's spreading, and what it's doing to people. We need to find out as much as we can about the nature of the aliens so we can figure out a way to eliminate them. How do they communicate with each other? Are they telepathic, like in *Village of the Damned,* or do they use some other form of communication? If they're telepathic, can they read our minds as well as each others'?"

"If they could, wouldn't they know we're on to them?" I said.

The phone rang again.

"It's probably my ex-wife again," he said.

I picked up the remote and flicked on *Infiltrators from Space* again.

Gary answered the phone. "Yes?" he said, and then warily, "How did you get my number?"

The hero slammed down the phone and ran to the window. Dozens of police cars were pulling up, lights flashing.

"Sure," Gary said. He grinned. "No, I won't forget."

He hung up. "That was Penny. She forgot to give me my Holiday Goodies slip. I'm supposed to take in four dozen sugar cookies next Monday." He shook his head wonderingly. "Now, *there's* somebody I'd like to see taken over by the aliens."

He sat down on the couch and started making a list. "Okay, methods of fighting them. Diseases. Poison. Dynamite. Nuclear weapons. What else?"

I didn't answer. I was thinking about what he'd said about wishing Penny would be taken over.

"The problem with all of those solutions is that they kill the people,

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too," Gary said. "What we need is something like the virus they used in *Invasion*. Or the ultrasonic pulses only the aliens could hear in *War with the Slugmen*. If we're going to stop them, we've got to find something that kills the parasite but not the host."

"Do we have to stop them?"

"What?" he said. "Of course we have to stop them. What do you mean?"

"All the aliens in these movies turn people into zombies or monsters," I said. "They shuffle around, attacking people and killing them and trying to take over the world. Nobody's done anything like that. People are standing on the right and walking on the left, the suicide rate's down, my sister's dating a very nice guy. Everybody who's been taken over is nicer, happier, more polite. Maybe the parasites are a good influence, and we shouldn't interfere."

"And maybe that's what they want us to think. What if they're acting nice to trick us, to keep us from trying to stop them? Remember *Attack of the Soul Killers*? What if it's all an act, and they're only acting nice till the takeover's complete?"

If it was an act, it was a great one. Over the next few days, Solveig, in a red straw hat, announced she was naming her baby Jane, Jim Bridgeman nodded at me in the elevator, my cousin Celia's newsletter/diary was short and funny, and the waiter, sporting a soda jerk's hat, got both Tonya's and my orders right.

"No pickles!" Tonya said delightedly, picking up her sandwich. "Ow! Can you get carpal tunnel syndrome from wrapping Christmas presents? My hand's been hurting all morning."

She opened her file folder. There was a new diagram inside, a rectangle with names written all around the sides.

"Is that your Christmas schedule?" I asked.

"No," she said, showing it to me. "It's a seating arrangement for Christmas dinner. It was crazy, running the kids from house to house like that, so we decided to just have everybody at our house."

I took a startled look at her, but she was still hatless.

"I thought Tom's ex-wife couldn't stand his parents."

"Everybody's agreed we all need to get along for the kids' sake. After all, it's Christmas."

I was still staring at her.

She put her hand up to her hair. "Do you like it? It's a wig. John got it for me for Christmas. For being such a great mother to the boys through the divorce. I couldn't believe it." She patted her hair. "Isn't it great?"

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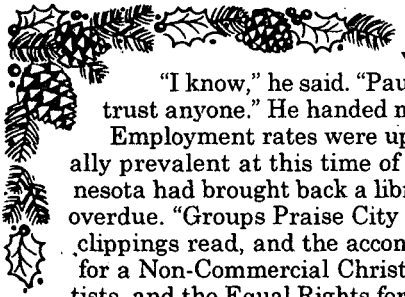

"They're hiding their aliens under wigs," I told Gary.

"I know," he said. "Paul Gunden got a new toupee. We can't trust anyone." He handed me a folder full of clippings.

Employment rates were up. Thefts of packages from cars, usually prevalent at this time of year, were down. A woman in Minnesota had brought back a library book that was twenty-two years overdue. "Groups Praise City Hall Christmas Display," one of the clippings read, and the accompanying picture showed the People for a Non-Commercial Christmas, the Holy Spirit Southern Baptists, and the Equal Rights for Ethnics activists holding hands and singing Christmas carols around the crèche.

On the ninth, Mom called. "Have you written your newsletter yet?"

"I've been busy," I said, and waited for her to ask me if I'd met anyone lately at work.

"I got Jackie Peterson's newsletter this morning," she said.

"So did I." The invasion apparently hadn't reached Miami. Jackie's newsletter, which is usually terminally cute, had reached new heights:

"M is for our trip to Mexico
E is for Every place else we'd like to go
R is for the RV that takes us there . . ."

And straight through MERRY CHRISTMAS, A HAPPY NEW YEAR, and both her first and last names.

"I do wish she wouldn't try to put her letters in verse," Mom said. "They never scan."

"Mom—" I said. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she said. "My arthritis has been kicking up the last couple of days, but otherwise I've never felt better. I've been thinking, there's no reason for you to send out newsletters if you don't want to."

"Mom," I said, "did Sueann give you a hat for Christmas?"

"Oh, she told you," Mom said. "You know, I don't usually like hats, but I'm going to need one for the wedding, and—"

"Wedding?"

"Oh, didn't she tell you? She and David are getting married right after Christmas. I am so relieved. I thought she was never going to meet anyone decent."

I reported that to Gary. "I know," he said glumly. "I just got a raise."

"I haven't found a single bad effect," I said. "No signs of violence or anti-social behavior. Not even any irritableness."

"*There* you are," Penny said crabbily, coming up with a huge poinsettia under each arm. "Can you help me put these on all the desks?"

"Are these the Christmas decorations?" I asked.

"No, I'm still waiting on that farmer," she said, handing me one of the poinsettias. "This is just a little something to brighten up everyone's

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desk." She reached down to move the pine cone dish on Gary's desk.

"You didn't eat your candy canes," she said.

"I don't like peppermint."

"Nobody ate their candy canes," she said disgustedly. "They all ate the chocolate kisses and left the candy canes."

"People like chocolate," Gary said, and whispered to me, "*When* is she going to be taken over?"

"Meet me in Hunziger's office right away," I whispered back, and said to Penny, "Where does this poinsettia go?"

"Jim Bridgeman's desk."

I took the poinsettia up to Computing on fifth. Jim was wearing his backward baseball cap. "A little something to brighten your desk," I said, handing it to him, and started back toward the stairs.

"Can I talk to you a minute?" he said, following me out into the stairwell.

"Sure," I said, trying to sound calm. "What about?"

He leaned toward me. "Have you noticed anything unusual going on?"

"You mean the poinsettia?" I said. "Penny does tend to go a little overboard for Christmas, but—"

"No," he said, putting his hand awkwardly to his cap, "people who are acting funny, people who aren't themselves?"

"No," I said, smiling. "I haven't noticed a thing."

I waited for Gary in Hunziger's office for nearly half an hour. "Sorry I took so long," he said when he finally got there. "My ex-wife called. What were you saying?"

"I was saying that even you have to admit it would be a good thing if Penny were taken over," I said. "What if the parasites aren't evil? What if they're those—what are those parasites that benefit the host called? You know, like the bacteria that help cows produce milk? Or those birds that pick insects off of rhinoceroses?"

"You mean symbiotes?" Gary said.

"Yes," I said eagerly. "What if this is some kind of symbiotic relationship? What if they're raising everyone's IQ or enhancing their emotional maturity, and it's having a good effect on us?"

"Things that sound too good to be true usually are. No," he said, shaking his head. "They're up to something, I know it. And we've got to find out what it is."

On the tenth when I came to work, Penny was putting up the Christmas decorations. They were, as she had promised, something special: wide swags of red velvet ribbons running all around the walls, with red

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velvet bows and large bunches of mistletoe every few feet. In between were gold-calligraphied scrolls reading, "And kiss me 'neath the mistletoe, For Christmas comes but once a year."

"What do you think?" Penny said, climbing down from her stepladder. "Every floor has a different quotation." She reached into a large cardboard box. "Accounting's is 'Sweetest the kiss that's stolen under the mistletoe.'"

I came over and looked into the box. "Where did you get all the mistletoe?" I asked.

"This apple farmer I know," she said, moving the ladder.

I picked up a big branch of the green leaves and white berries. "It must have cost a fortune." I had bought a sprig of it last year that had cost six dollars.

Penny, climbing the ladder, shook her head. "It didn't cost anything. He was glad to get rid of it." She tied the bunch of mistletoe to the red velvet ribbon. "It's a parasite, you know. It kills the trees."

"Kills the trees?" I said blankly, staring at the white berries.

"Or deforms them," she said. "It steals nutrients from the tree's sap, and the tree gets these swellings and galls and things. The farmer told me all about it."

As soon as I had the chance, I took the material on parasites Gary had downloaded into Hunziger's office and read through it.

Mistletoe caused grotesque swellings wherever its rootlets attached themselves to the tree. Anthracnose caused cracks and then spots of dead bark called cankers. Blight wilted trees' leaves. Witches' broom weakened limbs. Bacteria caused tumorlike growths on the trunk called galls.

We had been focusing on the mental and psychological effects when we should have been looking at physical ones. The heightened intelligence, the increase in civility and common sense, must simply be side effects of the parasites' stealing nutrients. And damaging the host.

I stuck the papers back in the file folder, went back to my desk, and called Sueann.

"Sueann, hi," I said. "I'm working on my Christmas newsletter, and I wanted to make sure I spelled David's name right. Is Carrington spelled C-A-R-R or C-E-R-R?"

"C-A-R-R. Oh, Nan, he's so wonderful! So different from the losers I usually date! He's considerate and sensitive and—"

"And how are you?" I said. "Everybody at work's been down with the flu."

"Really?" she said. "No, I'm fine."

What did I do now? I couldn't ask "Are you sure?" without making her suspicious. "C-A-R-R," I said, trying to think of another way to approach the subject.

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Sueann saved me the trouble. "You won't believe what he did yesterday. Showed up at work to take me home. He knew my ankles had been hurting, and he brought me a tube of Ben-Gay and a dozen pink roses. He is so thoughtful."

"Your ankles have been hurting?" I said, trying not to sound anxious.

"Like crazy. It's this weather or something. I could hardly walk on them this morning."

I jammed the parasite papers back in the file folder, made sure I hadn't left any on the desk like the hero in *Parasite People from Planet X,* and went up to see Gary.

He was on the phone.

"I've got to talk to you," I whispered.

"I'd like that," he said into the phone, an odd look on his face.

"What is it?" I said. "Have they found out we're on to them?"

"Shh," he said. "You know I do," he said into the phone.

"You don't understand," I said. "I've figured out what it's doing to people."

He held up a finger, motioning me to wait. "Can you hang on a minute?" he said into the phone, and put his hand over the receiver. "I'll meet you in Hunziger's office in five minutes," he said.

"No," I said. "It's not safe. Meet me at the post office."

He nodded, and went back to his conversation, still with that odd look on his face.

I ran back down to second for my purse and went to the post office. I had intended to wait on the corner, but it was crowded with people jockeying to drop money in the Salvation Army Santa Claus's kettle.

I looked down the sidewalk. Where was Gary? I went up the steps and scanned the street. There was no sign of him.

"Merry Christmas!" a man said, half-tipping a fedora and holding the door for me.

"Oh, no, I'm—" I began and saw Tonya coming down the street. "Thank you," I said and ducked inside.

It was freezing in there, and the line for the postal clerks wound out into the lobby. I got in it. It would take an hour at least to work my way to the front, which meant I could wait for Gary without looking suspicious.

Except that I was the only one not wearing a hat. Every single person in line had one on, and the clerks behind the counter were wearing mail carriers' caps. And broad smiles.

"Packages going overseas should really have been mailed by November fifteenth," the middle clerk was saying, not at all disgruntledly, to a little Japanese woman in a green cap, "but don't worry, we'll figure out a way to get your presents there on time."

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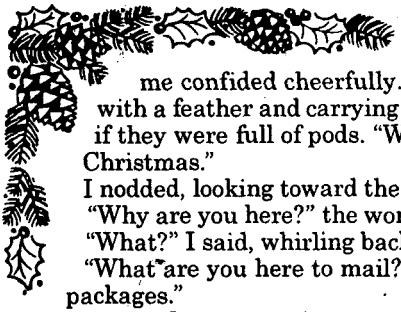

"The line's only about forty-five minutes long," the woman in front of me confided cheerfully. She was wearing a small black hat with a feather and carrying four enormous packages. I wondered if they were full of pods. "Which isn't bad at all, considering it's Christmas."

I nodded, looking toward the door. Where was he?

"Why are you here?" the woman said, smiling.

"What?" I said, whirling back around, my heart pounding.

"What are you here to mail?" she said. "I see you don't have any packages."

"S-stamps," I stammered.

"You can go ahead of me," she said. "If all you're buying is stamps. I've got all these packages to send. You don't want to wait for that."

I *do* want to wait, I thought. "No, that's all right. I'm buying a *lot* of stamps," I said. "I'm buying several sheets. For my Christmas newsletter."

She shook her head, balancing the packages. "Don't be silly. You don't want to wait while they weigh all these." She tapped the man in front of her. "This young lady's only buying stamps," she said. "Why don't we let her go ahead of us?"

"Certainly," the man, who was wearing a Russian karakul hat, said, and bowed slightly, stepping back.

"No, really," I began, but it was too late. The line had parted like the Red Sea.

"Thank you," I said, and walked up to the counter. "Merry Christmas."

The line closed behind me. They know, I thought. They know I was looking up plant parasites. I looked desperately toward the door.

"Holly and ivy?" the clerk said, beaming at me.

"What?" I said.

"Your stamps." He held up two sheets. "Holly and ivy or Madonna and child?"

"Holly and ivy," I said weakly. "Three sheets, please."

I paid for the sheets, thanked the mob again, and went back out into the freezing cold lobby. And now what? Pretend I had a box and fiddle with the combination? *Where* was he?

I went over to the bulletin board, trying not to seem suspicious, and looked at the wanted posters. They had probably all turned themselves in by now and were being model prisoners. And it really was a pity they were going to have to be stopped. *If* they could be stopped.

It had been easy in the movies. (In the movies, that is, in which they had managed to defeat them, which wasn't all that many. Over half the movies had ended with the whole world being turned into glowing green eyes.) And in the ones where they did defeat them, there had been an aw-

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ful lot of explosions and hanging precariously from helicopters. I hoped whatever we came up with didn't involve skydiving.

Or a virus or ultrasonic sound, because even if I knew a doctor or scientist to ask, I couldn't confide in them. "We can't trust anybody," Gary had said, and he was right. We couldn't risk it. There was too much at stake. And we couldn't call the police. "It's all in your imagination, Miss Johnson," they would say. "Stay right there. We're on our way."

We would have to do this on our own. And *where* was Gary?

I looked at the wanted posters some more. I was sure the one in the middle looked like one of Sueann's old boyfriends. He—

"I'm sorry I'm late," Gary said breathlessly. His ears were red from the cold, and his hair was ruffled from running. "I had this phone call and—"

"Come on," I said, and hustled him out of the post office, down the steps, and past the Santa and his mob of donors.

"Keep walking," I said. "You were right about the parasites, but not because they turn people into zombies."

I hurriedly told him about the galls and Tonya's carpal tunnel syndrome. "My sister was infected at Thanksgiving, and now she can hardly walk," I said. "You were right. We've got to stop them."

"But you don't have any proof of this?" he said. "It could be arthritis or something, couldn't it?"

I stopped walking. "What?"

"You don't have any proof that it's the aliens that are causing it. It's cold. People's arthritis always acts up when it's cold out. And even if the aliens are causing it, a few aches and pains is a small price to pay for all the benefits. You said yourself—"

I stared at his hair.

"Don't look at me like that," he said. "I haven't been taken over. I've just been thinking about what you said about your sister's engagement and—"

"Who was on the phone?"

He looked uncomfortable. "The thing is—"

"It was your ex-wife," I said. "She's been taken over, and now she's nice, and you want to get back together with her. That's it, isn't it?"

"You know how I've always felt about Marcie," he said guiltily. "She says she never stopped loving me."

When something sounds too good to be true, it probably is, I thought.

"She thinks I should move back in and see if we can't work things out. But that isn't the only reason," he said, grabbing my arm. "I've been looking at all those clippings—dropouts going back to school, escaped convicts turning themselves in—"

"People returning overdue library books," I said.

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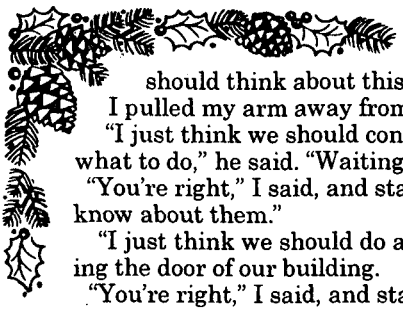

"Are we willing to be responsible for ruining all that? I think we should think about this before we do anything."

I pulled my arm away from him.

"I just think we should consider all the factors before we decide what to do," he said. "Waiting a few days can't hurt."

"You're right," I said, and started walking. "There's a lot we don't know about them."

"I just think we should do a little more research," he said, opening the door of our building.

"You're right," I said, and started up the stairs.

"I'll talk to you tomorrow, okay?" he said when we got to second.

I nodded and went back to my desk and put my head in my hands.

He was willing to let parasites take over the planet so he could get his ex-wife back, But were my motives any better than his? Why had I believed in an alien invasion in the first place, and spent all that time watching science fiction movies and having huddled conversations? So I could spend time with him.

He was right. A few aches and pains were worth it to have Sueann married to someone nice and postal workers non-disgruntled and passengers remaining seated till those people with connecting flights had deplaned.

"Are you okay?" Tonya said, leaning over my desk.

"I'm fine," I said. "How's your arm?"

"Fine," she said, rotating the wrist to show me. "It must have been a cramp or something."

I didn't *know* these parasites were like mistletoe. They might only cause temporary aches. Gary was right. We needed to do more research. Waiting a few days couldn't hurt.

The phone rang. "I've been trying to get hold of you," Mom said. "Dakota's in the hospital. They don't know what it is. It's something wrong with her legs. You need to call Allison."

"I will," I said and hung up the phone.

I logged onto my computer, called up the file I'd been working on, and scrolled halfway through it so it would look like I was just away from my desk for a minute, took off my high heels and changed into my sneakers, stuck the high heels in my desk drawer, grabbed my purse and coat, and took off.

The best place to look for information on how to get rid of the parasites was the library, but the card file was on-line, and you had to use your library card to get access. The next best was a bookstore. Not the independent on Sixteenth. Their clerks were far too helpful. And knowledgeable.

I went to the Barnes & Noble on Eighth, taking the back way (but no alleys). It was jammed, and there was some kind of book signing going on

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up front, but nobody paid any attention to me. Even so, I didn't go straight to the gardening section. I wandered casually through the aisles, looking at T-shirts and mugs and stopping to thumb through a copy of *How Irrational Fears Can Ruin Your Life*, gradually working my way back to the gardening section.

They only had two books on parasites: *Common Garden Parasites and Diseases* and *Organic Weed and Pest Control.* I grabbed them both, retreated to the literature section, and began to read.

"Fungicides such as Benomyl and Ferbam are effective against certain rusts," *Common Garden Parasites* said. "Streptomycin is effective against some viruses."

But which was this, if either? "Spraying with Diazinon or Malathion can be effective in most cases. Note: These are dangerous chemicals. Avoid all contact with skin. Do not breathe fumes."

That was out. I put down *Common Garden Parasites* and picked up *Organic Weed and Pest Control.* At least it didn't recommend spraying with deadly chemicals, but what it did recommend wasn't much more useful. Prune affected limbs. Remove and destroy berries. Cover branches with black plastic.

Too often it said simply: Destroy all infected plants.

"The main difficulty in the case of parasites is to destroy the parasite without also destroying the host." That sounded more like it. "It is therefore necessary to find a substance that the host can tolerate that is intolerable to the parasite. Some rusts, for instance, cannot tolerate a vinegar and ginger solution, which can be sprayed on the leaves of the host plant. Red mites, which infest honeybees, are allergic to peppermint. Frosting made with oil of peppermint can be fed to the bees. As it permeates the bees' systems, the red mites drop off harmlessly. Other parasites respond variously to spearmint, citrus oil, oil of garlic, and powdered aloe vera."

But which? And how could I find out? Wear a garlic necklace? Stick an orange under Tonya's nose? There was no way to find out without them figuring out what I was doing.

I kept reading. "Some parasites can be destroyed by rendering the environment unfavorable. For moisture-dependent rusts, draining the soil can be beneficial. For temperature-susceptible pests, freezing and/or use of smudge pots can kill the invader. For light-sensitive parasites, exposure to light can kill the parasite."

Temperature-sensitive. I thought about the hats. Were they to hide the parasites or to protect them from the cold? No, that couldn't be it. The temperature in the building had been turned down to freezing for two weeks, and if they needed heat, why hadn't they landed in Florida?

I thought about Jackie Peterson's newsletter. She hadn't been affected. And neither had Uncle Marty, whose newsletter had come this morning.

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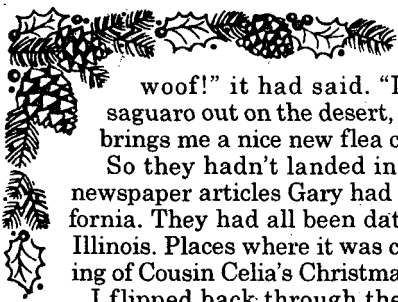

Or, rather, Uncle Marty's dog, who ostensibly dictated them. "Woof, woof!" it had said. "I'm lying here under a Christmas saguaro out on the desert, chewing on a bone, and hoping Santa brings me a nice new flea collar."

So they hadn't landed in Arizona or Miami, and none of the newspaper articles Gary had circled had been from Mexico or California. They had all been datelined Minnesota and Michigan and Illinois. Places where it was cold. Cold and cloudy, I thought, thinking of Cousin Celia's Christmas newsletter. Cold and cloudy.

I flipped back through the pages, looking for the reference to light-sensitive parasites.

"It's right back here," a voice said.

I shut the book, jammed it in among Shakespeare's plays and snatched up a copy of *Hamlet*.

"It's for my daughter," the customer, who was, thankfully, hatless, said, appearing at the end of the aisle. "That's what she said she wanted for Christmas when I called her. I was so surprised. She hardly ever reads."

The clerk was right behind her, wearing a mobcap with red and green ribbons. "Everybody's reading Shakespeare right now," she said, smiling. "We can hardly keep it on the shelves."

I ducked my head and pretended to read the *Hamlet*. "O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!" Hamlet said. "I set it down, that one may smile, and smile, and be a villain."

The clerk started along the shelves, looking for the book. "*King Lear, King Lear* . . . let's see."

"Here it is," I said, handing it to her before she reached *Common Garden Parasites*.

"Thank you," she said, smiling. She handed it to the customer. "Have you been to our book signing yet? Darla Sheridan, the fashion designer, is in the store today, signing her new book, *In Your Easter Bonnet*. Hats are coming back, you know."

"Really?" the customer said.

"She's giving away a free hat with every copy of the book," the clerk said.

"*Really?*" the customer said. "Where, did you say?"

"I'll show you," the clerk said, still smiling, and led the customer away like a lamb to the slaughter.

As soon as they were gone, I pulled out *Organic Gardening* and looked up "light-sensitive" in the index. Page 264. "Pruning branches above the infection and cutting away surrounding leaves to expose the source to sunlight or artificial light will usually kill light-sensitive parasites."

I closed the book and hid it behind the Shakespeare plays, laying it on its side so it wouldn't show, and pulled out *Common Garden Pests* again.

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"Hi," Gary said, and I nearly dropped the book. "What are you doing here?"

"What are *you* doing here?" I said, cautiously closing the book.

He was looking at the title. I stuck it on the shelf between *Othello* and *The Riddle of Shakespeare's Identity*.

"I realized you were right." He looked cautiously around. "We've got to destroy them."

"I thought you said they were symbiotes, that they were beneficial," I said, watching him warily.

"You think I've been taken over by the aliens, don't you?" he said. He ran his hand through his hair. "See? No hat, no toupee."

But in *The Puppet Masters* the parasites had been able to attach themselves anywhere along the spine.

"I thought you said the benefits outweighed a few aches and pains," I said.

"I wanted to believe that," he said ruefully. "I guess what I really wanted to believe was that my ex-wife and I would get back together."

"What changed your mind?" I said, trying not to look at the bookshelf.

"You did," he said. "I realized somewhere along the way what a dope I'd been, mooning over her when you were right there in front of me. I was standing there listening to her talk about how great it was going to be to get back together, and all of a sudden I realized that I didn't want to, that I'd found somebody nicer, prettier, someone I could trust. And that someone was you, Nan." He smiled at me. "So what have you found out? Something we can use to destroy them?"

I took a long, deep breath, and looked at him, deciding.

"Yes," I said, and pulled out the book. I handed it to him. "The section on bees. It says in here that introducing allergens into the bloodstream of the host can kill the parasite."

"Like in *Infiltrators from Space*."

"Yes." I told him about the red mites and the honeybees. "Oil of wintergreen, citrus oil, garlic, and powdered aloe vera are all used on various pests. So if we can introduce peppermint into the food of the affected people, it—"

"Peppermint?" he said blankly.

"Yes. Remember how Penny said nobody ate any of the candy canes she put out? I think it's because they're allergic to peppermint," I said, watching him.

"Peppermint," he said thoughtfully. "They didn't eat any of the ribbon candy Jan Gundell had on her desk either. I think you've hit it. So how are you going to get them to ingest it? Put it in the water cooler?"

"No," I said. "In cookies. Chocolate chip cookies. Everybody loves chocolate." I pushed the books into place on the shelf and started for the front.

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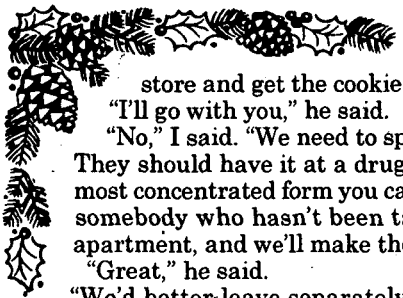

"It's my turn to bring Holiday Goodies tomorrow. I'll go to the grocery store and get the cookie ingredients—"

"I'll go with you," he said.

"No," I said. "We need to split up. You get the oil of peppermint. They should have it at a drugstore or a health food store. Buy the most concentrated form you can get, and make sure you buy it from somebody who hasn't been taken over. I'll meet you back at my apartment, and we'll make the cookies there."

"Great," he said.

"We'd better leave separately," I said. I handed him the *Othello*. "Here. Go buy this. It'll give you a bag to carry the oil of peppermint in."

He nodded and started for the checkout line. I walked out of Barnes & Noble, went down Eighth to the grocery store, ducked out the side door, and went back to the office. I stopped at my desk for a metal ruler, and ran up to fifth. Jim Bridgeman, in his backward baseball cap, glanced up at me and then back down at his keyboard.

I went over to the thermostat.

And this was the moment when everyone surrounded you, pointing and squawking an unearthly screech at you. Or turned and stared at you with their glowing green eyes. I twisted the thermostat dial as far up as it would go, to 95.

Nothing happened.

Nobody even looked up from their computers. Jim Bridgeman was typing intently.

I pried the dial and casing off with the metal ruler and stuck them in my coat pocket, bent the metal nub back so it couldn't be moved, and walked back out to the stairwell.

And now, please let it warm up fast enough to work before everybody goes home, I thought, clattering down the stairs to fourth. Let everybody start sweating and take off their hats. Let the aliens be light-sensitive. Let them not be telepathic.

I jammed the thermostats on fourth and third, and clattered down to second. Our thermostat was on the far side, next to Hunziger's office. I grabbed up a stack of memos from my desk, walked purposefully across the floor, dismantled the thermostat, and started back toward the stairs.

"Where do you think you're going?" Solveig said, planting herself firmly in front of me.

"To a meeting," I said, trying not to look as lame and frightened as the hero's girlfriend in the movies always did. She looked down at my sneakers. "Across town."

"You're not going anywhere," she said.

"Why not?" I said weakly.

"Because I've got to show you what I bought Jane for Christmas."

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She reached for a shopping bag under her desk. "I know I'm not due till May, but I couldn't resist this," she said, rummaging in the bag. "It's so cute!"

She pulled out a tiny pink bonnet with white daisies on it. "Isn't it adorable?" she said. "It's newborn size. She can wear it home from the hospital. Oh, and I got her the cutest—"

"I lied," I said, and Solveig looked up alertly. "Don't tell anybody, but I completely forgot to buy a Secret Santa gift. Penny'll kill me if she finds out. If anybody asks where I've gone, tell them the ladies' room," I said, and took off down to first.

The thermostat was right by the door. I disabled it and the one in the basement, got my car (looking in the back seat first, unlike the people in the movies) and drove to the courthouse and the hospital and McDonald's, then called my mother and invited myself to dinner. "I'll bring dessert," I said, drove out to the mall, and hit the bakery, the Gap, the video rental place, and the theater multiplex on the way.

Mom didn't have the TV on. She did have the hat on that Sueann had given her. "Don't you think it's adorable?" she said.

"I brought cheesecake," I said. "Have you heard from Allison and Mitch? How's Dakota?"

"Worse," she said. "She has these swellings on her knees and ankles. The doctors don't know what's causing them." She took the cheesecake into the kitchen, limping slightly. "I'm so worried."

I turned up the thermostats in the living room and the bedroom and was plugging the space heater in when she brought in the soup. "I got chilled on the way over," I said, turning the space heater up to high. "It's freezing out. I think it's going to snow."

We ate our soup, and Mom told me about Sueann's wedding. "She wants you to be her maid of honor," she said, fanning herself. "Aren't you warm yet?"

"No," I said, rubbing my arms.

"I'll get you a sweater," she said, and went into the bedroom, turning the space heater off as she went.

I turned it back on and went into the living room to build a fire in the fireplace.

"Have you met anyone at work lately?" she called in from the bedroom.

"What?" I said, sitting back on my knees.

She came back in without the sweater. Her hat was gone and her hair was mussed up, as if something had thrashed around in it. "I hope you're not still refusing to write a Christmas newsletter," she said, going into the kitchen and coming out again with two plates of cheesecake. "Come

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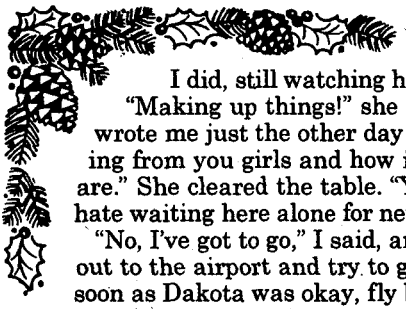

sit down and eat your dessert," she said.

I did, still watching her warily.

"Making up things!" she said. "What an idea! Aunt Margaret wrote me just the other day to tell me how much she loves hearing from you girls and how interesting your newsletters always are." She cleared the table. "You can stay for awhile, can't you? I hate waiting here alone for news about Dakota."

"No, I've got to go," I said, and stood up. "I've got to . . ." To drive out to the airport and try to get a flight to Spokane. And then, as soon as Dakota was okay, fly back and start hitting Wal-mart and Burger King and every restaurant and office building and house in town. And in the state. And in Michigan and Minnesota.

I've got to . . . what? I thought, feeling suddenly tired. Run wildly around turning up thermostats until I fell over from exhaustion? And then what? It was when people fell asleep in the movies that the aliens took them over. And there was no way I could stay awake until every parasite was exposed to the light, even if they didn't catch me and turn me into one of them. Even if I didn't turn my ankle.

The phone rang.

"Tell them I'm not here," I said.

"Who?" Mom asked, picking it up. "It's Sueann," she said, putting her hand over the receiver, and listened for a long interval. "She broke up with her boyfriend."

"With David?" I said. "Give me the phone."

"I thought you said you weren't here," she said, handing the phone over.

"Sueann?" I said. "Why did you break up with David?"

"Because he's so deadly dull," she said. "He's always calling me and sending me flowers and being nice. He even wants to get married. And tonight at dinner, I just thought, '*Why* am I dating him?,' and we broke up."

Mom went over and turned on the TV. "In local news," the CNN guy said, "special interest groups banded together to donate fifteen thousand dollars to City Hall's Christmas display."

"Where were you having dinner?" I asked Sueann. "At McDonald's?"

"No, at this pizza place, which is another thing. All he ever wants is to go to dinner or the movies. We never do anything *interesting*."

"Did you go to a movie tonight?" She might have been in the multiplex at the mall.

"*No*. I *told* you, I broke up with him."

This made no sense. I hadn't hit any pizza places.

"Weather is next," the guy on CNN said.

"Mom, can you turn that down?" I said. "Sueann, this is important. Tell me what you're wearing."

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"Jeans and my blue top and my zodiac necklace. What does that have to do with my breaking up with David?"

"Are you wearing a hat?"

"In our forecast just ahead," the CNN guy said, "great weather for all you people trying to get your Christmas shopping d—"

Mom turned the TV down.

"Mom, turn it back up," I said, motioning wildly.

"No, I'm not wearing a hat," Sueann said. "What does that have to do with whether I broke up with David or not?"

The weather map behind the CNN guy was covered with 62, 65, 70, 68. "*Mom*," I said.

She fumbled with the remote.

"You won't *believe* what he did the other day," Sueann said, outraged. "Gave me an engagement ring! Can you imag—"

"—unseasonably warm temperatures and *lots* of sunshine," the weather guy blared out. "Continuing right through Christmas."

"I mean, what was I thinking?" Sueann said.

"Shh," I said. "I'm trying to listen to the weather."

"It's supposed to be nice all next week," Mom said.

It was nice all the next week. Allison called to tell me Dakota was back home. "The doctors don't know what it was, some kind of bug or something, but whatever it was, it's completely gone. She's back taking ice skating and tap dancing lessons, and next week I'm signing both girls up for Junior Band."

"You did the right thing," Gary said grudgingly. "Marcie told me her knee was really hurting. When she was still talking to me, that is."

"The reconciliation's off, huh?"

"Yeah," he said, "but I haven't given up. The way she acted proves to me that her love for me is still there, if I can only reach it."

All it proved to me was that it took an invasion from outer space to make her seem even marginally human, but I didn't say so.

"I've talked her into going into marriage counseling with me," he said. "You were right not to trust me, either. That's the mistake they always make in those body-snatcher movies, trusting people."

Well, yes and no. If I'd trusted Jim Bridgeman, I wouldn't have had to do all those thermostats alone.

"You were the one who turned the heat up at the pizza place where Sueann and her fiancé were having dinner," I said after Jim told me he'd figured out what the aliens' weakness was after seeing me turn up the thermostat on fifth. "You were the one who'd checked out *Attack of the Soul Killers*."

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"I tried to talk to you," he said. "I don't blame you for not trusting me. I should have taken my hat off, but I didn't want you to see my bald spot."

"You can't go by appearances," I said.

By December fifteenth, hat sales were down, the mall was jammed with ill-tempered shoppers, at City Hall an animal rights group was protesting Santa Claus's wearing fur, and Gary's wife had skipped their first marriage counseling session and then blamed it on him.

It's now four days till Christmas, and things are completely back to normal. Nobody at work's wearing a hat except Jim, Solveig's naming her baby Durango, Hunziger's suing Management for firing him, anti-depressant sales are up, and my mother called just now to tell me Sueann has a new boyfriend who's a terrorist, and to ask me if I'd sent out my Christmas newsletters yet. And had I met anyone lately at work.

"Yes," I said. "I'm bringing him to Christmas dinner."

Yesterday Betty Holland filed a sexual harassment suit against Nathan Steinberg for kissing her under the mistletoe, and I was nearly run over on my way home from work. But the world has been made safe from cankers, leaf wilt, and galls.

And it makes an interesting Christmas Newsletter.

Whether it's true or not.

Wishing you and yours
a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year,
Nan Johnson ●

Connie Willis, an inveterate author of Christmas newsletters, is currently a finalist for her sixth Hugo award. She's nominated this time for her short story, "The Soul Selects Her Own Society," which appeared in our March 1996 issue. Ms. Willis's new novel, *To Say Nothing of the Dog*, will be out next month from Bantam.

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NEXT ISSUE

JANUARY COVER STORY

Next issue begins another year of Cutting-Edge, State-Of-The-Art *Asimov's* stories, from the Biggest Names in the business as well as the most exciting new writers, so subscribe today and be sure to miss none of the great stuff we have coming up for you in 1998—and find out for yourself why we've won the Locus Award for Best Magazine for an unprecedented eight years in a row, why the *Austin Chronicle* calls us "the most consistently innovative and readable SF magazine on the newsstands today," and why we put more stories on the 1997 Final Hugo Ballot than all of our competitors combined!

Critically acclaimed writer **Robert Reed** returns with a sequel to his popular stories "Sister Alice" and "Brother Perfect," taking us millions of years into the future, to a time when humans have developed the powers of gods—but with such vast power comes vast responsibilities as well, and the possibility of vast devastation and destruction if those godlike powers are misused . . . as you will see in this colorful and exciting new novella, in which all of humanity is hurtling toward a deadly confrontation with the awesome "Mother Death."

BIG NAME WRITERS

Nebula and Hugo-winner **Geoffrey A. Landis**, one of the best "hard science" writers in the business, sweeps us along with an intrepid future adventurer bound for someplace NObody has ever gone before: a headlong plunge into a black hole, and out of it again—if he can figure out a way to get out of it, that is, with all the forces of the universe against him . . . as we go "Approaching Perimelasma" in a suspenseful and hair-raising cosmic ride unlike any you've ever taken before; new writer **R. Neube** checks us aboard a luxury spaceliner for a voyage into the dangerous realms of power politics and interstellar intrigue in the distinguished company of "King Moron"; Hugo-winner **Kristine Kathryn Rusch** returns after a long absence with some poignant and evocative "Reflections on Life and Death"; **Kandis Elliot** whips us through a fast-paced, flatout gonzo technicolor extravaganza, with great Special Effects, in a wildly funny and yet ultimately disturbing story that examines the consequences of "Evolution in Guadalajara"; and **Brian C. Coad** makes his *Asimov's* debut with a bittersweet and clever look at what a young girl in an impoverished future society has to go through if she wants to do a good job of "Taking Care of Daddy."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column takes us along on "The Great Whale Hunt"; and Peter Heck brings us "On Books"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, letters, and other features.

Look for our January issue on sale on your newsstand on November 18, 1997, or subscribe today and be sure to miss none of the fantastic issues we have coming up for you next year!

COMING SOON

Great new stories by **Greg Egan, Michael Swanwick, Walter Jon Williams, L. Timmel Duchamp, Howard Waldrop, Esther M. Friesner,** and others.

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ON BOOKS

Paul Di Filippo

Horrors, Small and Big

Excellence in publishing consists of many things. High on the list are certainly selection of material and beauty of presentation. I'd like to alert you to a couple of firms who score big on both counts. Both specialize in reprinting horror fiction. One excels in physical book-crafting, the other in encyclopedic inclusiveness. Both deserve your kind patronage.

Bill Munster is the dynamo behind Footsteps Press (PO Box 75, Round Top, NY 12473). He issues a glossy magazine called *Footsteps* ($5.00, 52 pages, B&W art and photos), devoted mainly to the inside scoop on the scream queens and directors behind all those gloriously trashy B-movies. But he also produces a series of elegant, limited-run, autographed chapbooks that are in a straight line of descent from William Morris's lush publishing: creamy bond, suave fonts, ornate embellishments. Ray Bradbury's *The Dragon* ($20.00) reminded me of how much Roger Zelazny owed to his October Countryman. Douglas Winter's *Splatter* ($10.00) applies Ballardian stylistic tricks to a recursive examination of the horror genre, with illos by J. K. Potter. *Pelts* ($10.00) by F. Paul Wilson is a first printing of a gory tale about the revenge of the animal kingdom upon a segment of callous humanity. Richard Matheson plunks us down before a vampiric TV in *Through Channels* ($10.00), while his son, Richard Christian Matheson, shows us a vacationing winter-solstice demigod in *Holiday* ($10.00).

Our other firm, Chaosium (950 56th Street, Oakland, CA 94608), was once known primarily as a games company. Over the past few years, however, they have lately begun releasing humongous volumes devoted to the Cthulhu Mythos. These handsome trade paperbacks are marked by generosity (I estimate they must contain over 150,000 words apiece) and by intelligent selection, thanks to the editorial guidance of weird-fiction maven Robert Price.

The Hastur Cycle ($10.95, 300 pages) gathers stories familiar and rare from a dozen authors, "tales that created and defined Dread Hastur, the King in Yellow, Nighted Yuggoth, and Dire Carcosa." As this subtitle indicates, much of the non-shivery pleasure to be derived from reading these stories under one cover lies in tracing the interplay of tropes and memes down the decades, as authors traded horrific icons back and forth in a multigenerational conversation-cum-potlatch. Price's perceptive introduc-

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tion and comments cover all the territory contained between Chandler and Foucault, *Weird Tales* and Derrida. This is scholarship that never forgets that we read for pleasure and thrills.

The last item in *The Hastur Cycle* is some fragments from Lin Carter, pointing us toward the next volume, Carter's own *The Xothic Legend Cycle* ($10.95, 272 pages). Not a high-profile figure today, nearly ten years after his death, Carter was a dedicated aficionado and booster of imaginative literature of all stripes, and was in no small part—with his reinvigoration of Conan and his excavation of fantasy classics—responsible for the current boom in trilogized narratives: a legacy both laudable and problematical. As a fiction writer, Carter's efforts were always second-rate—a fact Price, his literary executor, does not minimize. And yet Carter's prose was certainly readable, and possessed at best a kind of naïve charm. Centered mostly on the West Coast, these stories—whose structures, as Price elucidates, are often more complex than first apparent—extend Lovecraft's inspiration without themselves being inspired. Although an occasional line, such as the one that opens "The Bell in the Tower," certainly invokes that lovely old horripilation: "There was a man in London once who screamed when the church bells rang."

The Engine of the End

What are the odds that a new book that utilizes Chambers's *The King in Yellow* (1895) in a non-Lovecraftian way, as a symbol of *fin-de-siècle* decadence, should arrive on my doorstep at the same time as the Chaosium volumes? Not high, I would venture. Surely there must be some meaning behind the cosmic coincidence. I only hope that the message is not that the predictions in the second book are destined to come true. If so, humanity is in for a grim ride.

The novel in which a copy of *King* surfaces as a token of spiritual entropy is Elizabeth Hand's *Glimmering* (HarperPrism, hardcover, $22.00, 413 pages). This is not the first book she has written since her award-winning *Waking the Moon* (1995). In between came her novelization of the Gilliam film, *12 Monkeys* (1996), which in retrospect is a clear kissing cousin to *Glimmering*.

Hand economically sets up her premise in a two-page prologue: in this very year, 1997, an overdose of new ozone-destroying chemicals, coupled with a massive methane release from polar regions and an enormous solar flare, trigger a change in Earth's atmosphere, soon dubbed the Glimmering. Moiré sheets of cold colored flames replace our natural celestial view, and all electrical equipment in use at the instant of ignition is shorted out. This is clearly the end of civilization as we've abused it. Major adjustments are demanded. But with a blind stubbornness, the mass of mankind continues to hang on to old habits.

One of those with his head in the

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sand—circa 1999, two miserable years into the disaster—is John Chanvers Finnegan, a gay man who is heir to a dwindling family fortune (initially founded on the sale of Victorian glass Xmas ornaments, ironically echoing the current gaudy appearance of the Earth). Finnegan lives in a decrepit Yonkers mansion with his elderly grandmother and housekeeper. The fact that he is dying of AIDS is understandably more vital to him than the world's demise. What will shake Finnegan out of his semi-charmed life? A visit and miraculous gift from his mysterious friend, Leonard Thrope, a devil-may-care Byronic artist—or "sociocultural pathologist"—intent on bearing witness to death and dying in all its forms.

Soon, Finnegan is reluctantly hosting stray pregnant waifs, seeing tangible ghosts, feeling love reawaken, and beginning to realize that he has been nominated for a larger role in the coming millennium than he had ever wished to play.

Hand, of course, excels at her gritty depiction of a world on the skids. No stranger to postapocalypses ever since her *Winterlong* (1990) and its sequels, she has a keen knack for conveying the psychic adjustments people must make to continue surviving in the midst of chaos. Unlike some Irwin Allen panoramic disaster, *Glimmering* has a smallish cast of major characters, allowing Hand to build up in great and subtle detail their realistic portraits. The visceral thrills of life in the ruins are balanced precisely by Hand's loving attention to individual psyches.

With a dollop of Lucius Shepard's *Green Eyes* (1984, and is there a sly allusion to Shepard in the character of music manager Lucius Chappell?), a smattering of Mark Helprin's *Winter's Tale* (1983), and a pinch of Disch's *334* (1972), and Hand's own salty broth and spices, *Glimmering* is a unique and tasty dish that might be called Ragnarok Ragout. Help yourself!

Foreign Affairs

Jacqueline Harpman was born in 1929. She has published ten novels and a collection of short stories. You are probably not lucky enough to know her name, though, for she is of Belgian birth, a resident of France, and nothing of hers has been available in English. Until now. From Seven Stories Press (632 Broadway, 7th Floor, NY, NY 10012) comes *I Who Have Never Known Men* (hardcover, $22.00, 224 pages). In the tradition of Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) and Shiel's *The Purple Cloud* (1901), Harpman's book is a bracingly grim existential exploration of the human character under the immense pressure of the ultimate estrangement: to be the sole sentient creature in an uncaring alien landscape.

In a windowless basement whose main feature is a largish cage live forty women. One, the youngest, who is called by the others only "the child," is our narrator. (Let us refer to her hereafter

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as Child.) The women are guarded by shifts of male keepers who never speak. The captives are fed twice a day, have zero privacy, and are not allowed even the solace of bodily contact amongst themselves. Their "crimes" and present location unknown, their memories partly wiped, they exist in a kind of apathetic stupor. The atmosphere of Cordwainer Smith's prison planet Shayol, without the biomorphic tortures, reigns.

Child is the exception. Angry, curious, inventive, she devises a method of timekeeping that inspires the others to take more interest in their stripped-down environment. This basic capability renews their spirits a bit. What happens shortly thereafter does so even more.

One day a siren sounds at the exact moment the cage is being opened for a feeding. The guards flee without a moment's hesitation or word of explanation, leaving the door ajar. After a stunned ten minutes, the women follow. They climb the steps of their cellar to find themselves alone, facing what they instinctively recognize as a nonterran, semi-desert landscape. We are at the quarter-mark of the novel. What follows next is a meticulously realistic Robinsonade, an adventure where survival is never in doubt, but sanity is.

By casting her book as Child's old-age memoir, Harpman eliminates a certain amount of suspense. Child also undercuts tension by frequently telling the reader—at certain crisis points—that such and such a mystery forever went unsolved. And yet none of this diminishes by one iota the enthralling seductiveness of the story (ably translated by Ros Schwartz). Child's voice is so compelling, her attitude so honest, her situation so heart-piercingly empathizable, that even a foregone outcome does not make a reader lose interest or even pause.

Like Kobo Abé and Yevgeny Zamiatin, Harpman grapples bravely with a universal question. What actions follow after one acknowledges, "I think, therefore I am"?

I know nothing of Ivan Laszlo save that he has written a wry, comico-political, occasionally silly novel called *Malmond* (Lost Coast Press, trade, $12.95, 205 pages, available through Cypress House, 155 Cypress Street, Fort Bragg, CA 95437). I assume Laszlo is a native English speaker, and yet because his book is quintessentially Ruritanian, evoking a specifically European Never-neverland much in the manner of Avram Davidson's *The Enquiries of Doctor Eszterhazy* (1975) or Le Guin's *Malafrena* (1979), I choose to lump him in with an actual European, Harpman. Such are the arbitrary critical conflations of art and reality.

Malmond, the country, with its capital, Malmond City, exists in our twentieth-century world, just a jet-flight away from London or New York. Yet it is a strange and beguiling place, the end-result of two millennia of history that do not jibe entirely with ours. Central

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to the disjuncture are two facts: despite having no local wild tigers, the natives nonetheless worship an amorous Tiger deity and his two avatars, the Tigress Harlot and the Tigress Mother. Second, present-day politics are shaped by leftover hero worship for the Koroly family, a clan of oversexed, brutal medieval dimwits from the "proboscidean era," when jousts and battles were conducted with lethal nose spikes worn like masks. (I told you about a certain silliness quotient.)

On the current Malmond scene, the megalomaniacal industrialist Morgon Milman has constructed a fake archaeological find, *à la* the Cardiff Giant, in order to bolster his own status. With the help of artist Elmona Trabel and her lover, history professor Glover Lozoli, he hopes to defraud the public. But when the conspirators attempt to enlist Elmona's naïve husband, art critic Egon, disaster erupts.

The first climax of these schemes occurs halfway through the book, culminating in some surprising deaths. Laszlo switches at this point from an omniscient viewpoint to Elmona's first-person narrative. But finding this move to be limiting to his story, he continues to jump among different perspectives in a helter-skelter manner. This initially frustrates, but if you can make the adjustment, you will be repaid with an intriguing working-out of the consequences of Milman's hubris.

Almost more beguiling than the present-day action are Laszlo's copious historical tales. The centuries of Koroly rule afford him many imaginative anecdotes about the Malmondian ancestors, and Laszlo nearly matches the Brooks-Reiner two-thousand-year-old-man character in dismissive putdowns and absurd revisionism. Combined with the modern-day hugger-mugger, these fractured fairy tales add up to a vivid subcreation.

Moldie Newbie

As one who has tremendously enjoyed the stories and novels of Rudy Rucker since even before the appearance of his first book, *White Light* (1980), I find myself now—with the publication of his latest, *Freeware* (Avon, hardcover, $23.00, 288 pages)—in the position of the clichéd sighted man trying to explain the concept of color to a blind person. Or should that be: a sphere trying to explain higher dimensions to A. Square? So steeped am I in the Ruckerian worldview, so faithful to the fecund essence of life do I find Rucker's prose and speculations, that it's hard for me to believe that there is anyone out there who would not instantly apprehend the boss fabulosity of Rucker's fiction.

Still, I suppose I have to try.

First, the simple facts.

Freeware follows *Software* (1982) and *Wetware* (1988) in chronicling the wild evolution of non-human cyberlife in the first half of the next century. Many of the same endearingly unpredictable characters—genius burnouts and

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simple souls, sleazy sickos and new-age naïfs—recur from the earlier books, but the bulk of the narrative follows newly introduced husband and wife Tre Deitz and Terri Percesepe. (Tre hacks, Terri surfs, and together they run the Clearlight Terrace Court Motel in Santa Cruz.) And oh, yeah: quite central to our tale is Monique, a moldie.

Moldies are fully sentient semi-organic robots, made out of imipolex, the smart plastic, and circuits of algae and mold. Only their form of AI can exist, since silicon-based intelligence and even dumb chips were destroyed by contagious chipmold some twenty years before our story opens.

And what drives the story in *Freeware*? Too many things to even begin to list! There's a plot by the moldies of the Moon to abduct their Earth cousins. There's Tre's search for the higher functions of the Perplexing Poultry algorithm. There's Randy Karl Tucker's ambition to escape his hick background. There's Willy Taze and Gurdle-7's quest for the Gurdle Decryption, which will enable them to download alien personalities from cosmic rays. And that's just scratching the surface. Suffice it to say that Rucker juggles all these bucking chainsaws with consummate skill, leaving one engine still running at the end of his act for a possible sequel.

Much has been made of Rucker's affinity with Dick, insofar as they both identify with and honor the common man, and both men (Dick often, Rucker almost always) write with a lucid simplicity that allows them to convey the weirdest ideas in the easiest to understand form. And of course Rucker pledges allegiance also to the sardonically insightful Thomas Pynchon (who invented imipolex, and whose character, Benny Profane, Rucker nods to with his Benny Phlogiston). But one important thing Rucker brings to the table that these men don't is, for lack of a better phrase, the hacker sensibility.

For Rucker, the plenum is the biggest toy: infinitely mutable, fruitful yet dangerous, susceptible to fine-tuning and tweaking. Rucker's characters plunge boldly into experimentation and manipulation, consequences be damned. Of course, this sometimes results in disaster, as when chipmold crashed civilization. But Rucker cheerfully affirms that even global catastrophes can be reversed in a mere decade or two. This attitude also goes far toward explaining why Rucker's characters are so sexually open: much as they eagerly poke or are poked by the cosmos, they promiscuously mate with each other simply because new combinations bring new results, and the universe runs on novelty.

Rucker's title here can be interpreted in a variety of ways: moldies trade their capabilities and actual substance in a very free way. Also, the cosmic ray personalities are software freed from material form. But in the end, the most salient aspect is simply that Rucker wishes—for himself, his characters and

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everyone else—the maximum freedom that reality will allow.

Public Futilities

Last year, based on several forerunners (and one I forgot till now: Stephen Dobyns' *The Wrestler's Cruel Study* [1993]), I predicted a surge of hyperbolic near-future comedies, a refreshing of SF's beloved satirical mode. I'm happy to announce that Matt Ruff's *Sewer, Gas & Electric* (Atlantic Monthly Press, hardcover, $23.00, 450 pages), the latest entry in this vein, is a superb, up-to-the-second example of SF's ability to envision futures that are self-consistently, believably, meaningfully, lovingly insane. This novel—subtitled "The Public Works Trilogy"—is both a hilarious farce and a deep examination of just what makes life worth living. Ruff has now leaped to the head of the neo-Swiftian pack, far outshining the clunky, pretentious David Foster Wallace.

Ruff's first book, *Fool on the Hill* (1988), appeared when he was only twenty-three. While an entertaining fabulation in the Peter Beagle manner, showing immense creativity and a sure instinct at plotting, it was tinged with a fey undergrad preciousness, despite Ruff's valiant attempts to escape such pitfalls. Crossing *Animal House* (1978) with *The Fisher King* (1991), *Fool* enacted a Grail Quest on the campus of Cornell, Ruff's alma mater, complete with talking animals, visiting Olympians, and nods to Richard Farina and Thomas Pynchon, two other Cornellians.

In his new book, which positively gleams from four years of buffing, Ruff has burned away any immaturity. His vision has become global and mature without sacrificing one wise bit of laughing childlike incredulity. Ruff sees through all façades and hypocritical shams, piercing through to exactly how the world brutally works, and dares to propose humanitarian alternatives.

The jam-packed realtime narrative—full of mutant sewer sharks, prankish eco-terrorists, and cranky AI's—occupies only a few days in the first quarter of the next century. Yet so many radical changes have happened in the two decades that separate our time from Ruff's future that he has plenty of fascinating backstory to elegantly insert. I can hardly begin to distill all the complex reality of Ruff's future history. But the main riff that fuels the central quest of the book is the origins of a plague that has genocidally erased every black person from the Earth, paving the way for the introduction of Electric Negroes, helpful androids manufactured by one Harry Gant, the paradoxically innocent megalomaniac who embodies the theories of real-life loonie Ayn Rand.

You can learn two things from the phrase "Electric Negro." First, Ruff has no useless compunctions about "good taste." In fact, the debate between PC and PU (Politically Uncorrect) thinking is a major theme of the novel, right up there with altruism versus selfishness and human frailty versus

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sterile perfectionism. Second, Ruff knows and loves genre SF. "Electric Sheep," anyone? There are subtle and overt allusions to everyone from Pohl (*The Years of the City* [1984]) to Lem, Verne to Wells in this book, and Ruff has a firm handle on all the field's tropes and stylings, teaching those old dogs some neat new tricks. Like Neal Stephenson (who not surprisingly offers a back cover endorsement), Ruff emerges from outside our ghetto barriers and proceeds with respect and affection to smash down those useless walls.

In giddy, colorful, bite-sized chunks that go down like literary M&M's spiked with Ecstasy, mixing Firesign Theater, the Marx Brothers and Edward Abbey into a glorious can of polka-dotted paint, *Sewer, Gas & Electric* presents a world populated with happily melancholic clowns—more Fools, if you will—battling piggishly shortsighted dictators for the fate of all mankind. And guess what—

We win!

Coppel's Kittuns

Alfred Coppel's first SF story appeared in 1947, to be followed by several novels, including a set of space-operas unified under the *Rhada* rubric. Starting in the seventies, however, he turned his talents to political thrillers, where he found an enthusiastic readership. But as we all know, love of SF is a virus impossible to eradicate utterly from the body, and it often flares up when least expected. If the victim has not gotten frequent booster shots during his downtime, however, the manifestation of the SF meme can be somewhat pale and sickly.

Luckily, this is not the case with the conscientious Coppel. In the *Goldenwing* series that signals his return to SF, he manages to write a thoroughly up-to-date brand of space opera that yet harks back to older models. Not as wildly speculative or inventive as, say, Baxter or McAuley, he compensates with clarity, suspense, and an attention to eternal virtues.

The sequence began in 1993 with *Glory*. A concise introduction informed the reader that over the span of a millennium, a war-wracked Earth had managed to plant a few dozen colonies among the closest stars. The means of interstellar transportation: immense Goldenwing ships such as *Gloria Coelis*. With racks of "skylar" sails that catch tachyons for push, they attain nearly the speed of light. Earth and her colonies are forever separated by voyages of many years and the Wired Starmen are a lonely, relativistically youthful elite who travel huge circuits that bring them back to familiar worlds only after many estranging decades.

In *Glory*, Coppel handily introduces us to that ship's crew, a heterogeneous assortment of likable, if prickly, men and women. Heading with a cargo delivery to the planet named Voerster, they find themselves caught up in the politics of that apartheid-based world, which has fallen back to fairly primitive conditions. Short of a

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crewmember when they arrive, they eventually lose another. Two replacements—discerned by their empathic talents—are found, and the Goldenwing escapes.

From this first book, one might assume that Coppel intends merely a series of planetfalls, entanglements, and near-escapes. But two seeds are planted here that will soon blossom. First, the *Glory*'s complement of cats have been Wired also, sharing the cyberspace ship-mentality (a likely development surprisingly underutilized in cyberpunk, it dawned on me). Second, the cats seem to sense through the ship's sensors a shadowy life-form in the depths of space.

Glory's War (1995) opens a fictional year later. The full-strength crew, slowly melding into a whole, finds themselves at Ross 248, where twin worlds settled by Russians with a more advanced technology are in the middle of an intrasystem war. Once more the Wired ones are embroiled in the conflict, which is abruptly terminated by the arrival of the Terror, that extradimensional entity sensed by the cats and now seen to be a kind of vampiric energy predator. *Glory* flees, realizing however that the escape is only temporary.

Glory's People (Tor, hardcover, $23.95, 320 pages) brings the ship and her crew to a world where High Japanese culture has been transplanted. The normal routine of the vessel has been totally supplanted by a desire to eliminate the Terror, which has focused on the planet Yamato due to experiments with an FTL drive that intrudes on the Terror's home dimension. Culminating in a kind of Skylarkian space battle, the book seems to leave open a path for future adventures—although *Glory*'s dominance of the spacelanes seems doomed in the wake of Yamato's new FTL ships.

Coppel does a number of things with brio. He builds worlds with near-Andersonian delight and detail. He stages battles in rousing Laumeresque fashion. And most centrally, he riffs intriguingly on Cordwainer Smith's psychic spacefarers. (At one point, the Terror is seen through an "open Gateway . . . part rathole and part dragon's lair," which should be clue enough for anyone familiar with "The Game of Rat and Dragon.")

Yet this series is hardly untouched by modernity. Over all human ambition lies an elegaic autumnal shroud. No blasters or Star Vikings exist. Life is hard, dying harder. Only the solidarity of the mind-linked crew, including cats and shipmind, offers a haven amidst the endless dark.

Long Night of the Wolfe

With last year's issuance of *Exodus from the Long Sun* (Tor, hardcover, $23.95, 384 pages), we can finally begin to say some semicogent things about Gene Wolfe's *Book of the Long Sun*. Unlike Coppel's *Glory* series discussed above—unlike most series in general—the *Long Sun* quartet is in reality one seam-

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less narrative, a market-dictated publishing freak, 1200-plus pages that should, in a more perfect world, have been enclosed between two cloth-covered boards only. (Wolfe himself has had some interesting things to say about the artistic rigors of such a project, in the pages of the *SFWA Bulletin*.) Prior to the appearance of this final volume, only partial truths could have been uttered about Wolfe's latest novel(s).

Those who might doubt the unity of the book should consider the publishing breakpoints and resumptions. While somewhat dramatically satisfying and terminal, the former are no more than traditional chapter closures, bridges broken in midair, not rainbow pots of gold.

At the end of the first volume, our protagonist's hand is upon a doorknob, mystery awaiting beyond. At the start of the second, he opens that selfsame door. At the end of *that* volume, we leave our hero kneeling in the mud by a dying man. He reappears, aged only a few hours, not until Chapter Two of the third book, but that is only because Wolfe has now decided to splinter the narrative among different viewpoints, and Chapter One of the third entry is devoted to other people. Book Three ends with our main character standing outdoors as friendly foreign troops prepare to enter his city in a victory parade. We find him a few pages into Chapter One of Book Four, hurriedly tackling personal chores before that very parade's start.

Much more important is the tightly enclosing timeframe. The entire action of the quartet takes place over a mere ten or fourteen days. Events from the first book reverberate continuously throughout. Wounds sustained in the opening volume have not even healed by the climax of the last. And of course a rigorously consistent symbolism and thematic unity enfolds all four volumes.

Enough of generalities. Our story opens in *Nightside the Long Sun* (1993), a book that is somewhat anomalous when compared with the later entries, since it represents the last days of the old order of affairs.

We are inside a multi-generation starship shaped like the traditional O'Neill colony: an immense spinning cylinder, inhabited lands on the curving interior wall, the eponymous source of heat and light a blaze that runs from Pole to Pole. The residents mostly know on some subliminal level that their world is artificial—especially as it is undercut by an immense tunnel network—but are too busy living their mundane, centuries-hallowed lives to bother themselves about destinations or cosmology. Especially since they are kept in line by very real AI gods who dwell in Mainframe and can possess their human servitors via an optical download. (This theocratic setup, by the way, echoes Harry Harrison's underrated *Captive Universe* [1969]).

Mediating between gods and mankind are the Pateras, the priests, and the Mayteras, or nuns.

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Patera Silk is our focus. This is his story, "The Book of Silk," as it is called retrospectively by a hidden narrator. Even when he is offstage, Silk dominates the action, the dialogue, the feelings of his fellow citizens of Viron. If we understand Silk, we understand the whole series.

Basically, Silk is the Brave Little Tailor, a simple soul with a high destiny. (In accordance with this, Wolfe's style and diction are considerably less erudite and recomplicated than in *The Book of the New Sun*. No lexicons will arise from this project.) From his opening epiphany Silk moves to eventual selfless dominance of his city, and insures the salvation of the whole Whorl of the Long Sun. This is the most obvious reading of his adventures. And yet Silk simultaneously embodies several other archetypes. He is Don Quixote, delusionary romantic. Consider how he falls impossibly in love with a woman he barely knows, ultimately throwing away everything to pursue her. He is a thief, the Jack of Shadows, to borrow the title of Zelazny's 1971 novel, which was a tribute to Jack Vance, whom Wolfe also admires. He is—no sarcasm intended—also the canny urban or *noir*-ish priest best envisioned as played by Bing Crosby, trying to save his parish. And as a true believer and hierophant, Silk also necessarily casts a shadow of Jesus, in everything from symbolic donkey rides to wounds received from soldiers to temptation in a High Place.

Most intriguingly for me, Silk is also Chesterton's Father Brown. Memories of that sleuthing priest become apparent every time Silk sits down his friends and retails his deductions, several times in each volume. If we need it made explicit, in *Exodus* Wolfe has Silk respond to a man who says he loves mysteries with: "I don't. I try to clear them up when I can. . . ."

In all these roles, though, Silk is unswervably honorable and good, yet humanly fallible: a rare figure in SF. Worldly accomplishments mean little to him; only the saving of his soul and those of his flock hold sway over him. All the thieving, fighting and political chicanery he must perform are aimed at nothing but establishing a peaceful atmosphere in which to minister to the common people of his city.

This focus causes Wolfe deliberately to keep the action bottled up within the precincts of Silk's beloved and thickly detailed city. Only the tiniest fraction of events occur in alternate settings. The clichéd "Hunt for the Control Room" scenario is almost nonexistent. This one-in-four book is, in fact, almost an anti-generationship tale. Oh, there are the momentary expected frissons—such as when Silk finally sees the stars for the first time—but the whole story could have been transplanted with minor changes to, say, Dynastic Egypt.

Not to say that Wolfe pulls rabbits out of his hat and calls them "smerps." A writer of his invention

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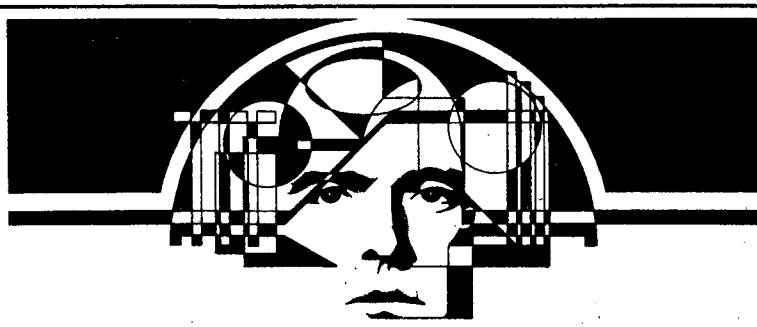
and subtlety is probably constitutionally incapable of such a sin. No, Wolfe's Simakian robots are utterly believable. His digital gods and their intrusive Windows are a fine invention. The Crew of Flyers who guard the Cargo (i.e., Silk and all his fellows) are weirdly tribal possessors of devolved knowledge.

Equally fine are Silk's supporting cast. Maytera Mint, later General Mint, is a convincing Joan of Arc. The whores Hyacinth and Chenille could have stepped out of Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* (1928). Silk's superiors in his order—Remora and Quetzal—somehow call up for me *A Canticle for Liebowitz* (1960). Even Silk's pet talking bird, Oreb, is granted a witty individualism.

The full-scale civil war between Silk and the illegal current government of Viron—a war foreshadowed in the second book, *Lake of the Long Sun* (1994), and fully underway by *Caldé of the Long Sun* (1994)—is also never less than realistic in its spurts of fury and weary pauses. As in Paul Park's Wolfe-resonant *Starbridge* books, the birth of a new order is portrayed as a contorted and painful process.

As long as I've already brought up Brecht, I might as well sum up the culminating effect of Silk's character on the reader with an epigram from that playwright's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1948): "Great is the seductive power of goodness."●



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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

A number of world and national con(vention)s now. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 13107B Autumn Wood Way, Fairfax VA 22033. The hot line is (703) 449-1276. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons) leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre, with a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

OCTOBER 1997

24-26—**MileHiCon.** For info, write: **Box 101322, Denver CO 80250. (Web) www.econet.com/milehicon/.** Or phone: **(303) 657-5912** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Lakewood CO (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Sheraton. Guests will include: Ed Bryant, Liz Danforth. Membership: $28 at the door.

24-27—**EuroCon/Irish Nat'l. Con.** Dublin Castle, Dublin Ireland. Robert Jordan. European continental con.

24-27—**Ohio Valley Filk Fest. (614) 851-0936.** Columbus OH. Big SF and fantasy folksinging meet.

30-Nov. 2—**World Fantasy Con.** Britannia Hotel, London UK. Joan Aiken, Iain Sinclair. Dracula centennial.

30-Nov. 2—**World Mystery Con. (AOL) bchrcon97.** Marriott, Monterey CA. Paretsky, Westlake, Julie Smith.

31-Nov. 2—**Spanish Nat'l. Con. (Web) www.catch22.com/sf/bem.** Barcelona Spain. O. Card, C. Gimenez, A. Font.

31-Nov. 2—**Canada Nat'l. Con/Primedia, 114-22 Tinder Cres., Toronto ON M4A 1L6. (905) 820-3844.** Holiday Inn Markham.

NOVEMBER 1997

7-9—**OryCon, Box 5703, Portland OR 97228. (503) 231-8652.** Red Lion Columbia River. S. Barnes, Frank Lurz.

7-9—**WindyCon, Box 184, Palatine IL 60078. (708) 383-6948.** Hyatt, Schaumburg IL. Tim Lane, Garriott, Budrys.

7-9—**SciCon, Box 9434, Hampton VA 23670. (757) 868-6738.** Holiday Inn Exec. Center, Virginia Beach VA. Kelly.

7-9—**TropiCon, Box 70143, Ft. Lauderdale FL 33307.** Doubletree Suites. Esther Friesner, Josepha Sherman.

7-9—**TusCon, Box 26823, Tucson AZ 85726. (520) 293-1455.** Executive Inn. J. Vornholt, M. Rawn, Ed Bryant.

14-16—**PhilCon, Box 8303, Philadelphia PA 19101. (215) 957-4004.** Adam's Mark. D. Simmons, A. Clark, G. Dozois.

14-16—**Atlantis, 2000-F Cheshire Bridge Rd. NE, Atlanta GA 30324.** Midtown Howard Johnson. Yolen, Strickland.

14-16—**NovaCon, 14 Park St., Lye, Stourbridge W. Mids. DY9 8SS, UK.** DeVere Abbey, Great Malvern. Hamilton.

21-23—**SoonerCon, Box 892687, Oklahoma City OK 73189. (405) 741-0455.** Clarion Hotel. Lansdale, Elmore, S. Walker.

28-30—**ConCat, 316 E. Scott Ave., Knoxville TN 37916. (423) 523-6986.** Radisson. Hambly, Effinger, Dietricks.

28-30—**LosCon, 11513 Burbank Blvd., N. Hollywood CA 91601. (818) 760-9234.** S.M. Stirling, J.M. Straczynski.

28-30—**SilCon, c/o Blanchette, 1012 Morse Ave. #15, Sunnyvale CA 94089. (408) 541-0358.** Dunfey. Huff, Brewton.

28-30—**Darkover Council, Box 7203, Silver Spring MD 20907. (202) 737-1609.** Holiday Inn, Timonium MD.

DECEMBER 1997

5-7—**DraCon, Box 36, Brno 612 00, Czech Republic. (05) 538-249, (E-mail) zrustek@fi.muni.cz.** Santon Hotel.

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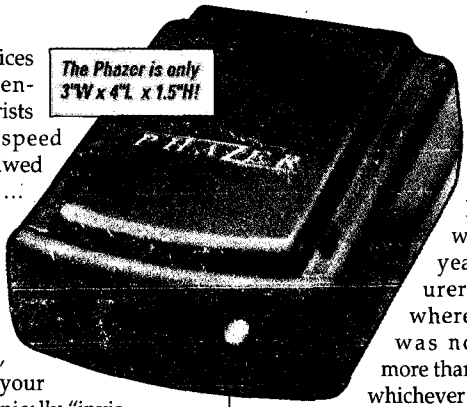
How to make your car invisible to radar and laser...*legally!*

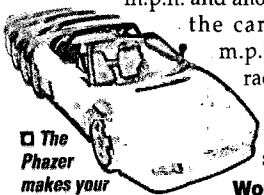
Rocky Mountain Radar introduces a device guaranteed to make your car electronically "invisible" to speed traps—if you get a ticket while using the product, the manufacturer will pay your fine!



Although devices exist that enable motorists to detect police speed traps, they're outlawed in many states... including mine.

The solution. Combining a passive radar scrambler with an active laser scrambler, the Phazer makes your automobile electronically "invisible" to speed-detecting equipment. And unless you live in Minnesota, Oklahoma or Washington, D.C., the Phazer is legal!

Scrambles radar. Police radar takes five to 10 speed measurements in about one second. The Phazer sends one signal that tells the police radar the car is going 15 m.p.h. and another signal that the car is going 312 m.p.h. Because the radar can't verify the speed, it displays no speed at all.



The Phazer makes your car invisible to police radar and lasers or the manufacturer will pay your speeding ticket!

Works with laser, too! The Phazer also protects you from Lidar guns that use the change in distance over time to detect a vehicle's speed. The Phazer fires invisible infrared pulses through the windshield. Laser guns interpret those pulses as a false indication of the car's distance, blocking speed measurement.

Encourage responsible driving. The Phazer *is not* intended to condone excessive speeding. For that reason, within the first year, the manufacturer will pay tickets where the speed limit was not exceeded by more than 30%, or 15 m.p.h., whichever is less.

Double protection. If the Phazer sounds good, but you prefer to be *notified* when you are in range of a police radar, the Phantom is for you. Ask your representative for more details!

Risk-free. Both products are backed by our risk-free trial and three-year manufacturer's warranty. If you're not satisfied, return them within 90 days for a refund.

The Phazer ..... **$199** $14 S&H
The Phantom ..... **$349** $18 S&H

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